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Author of "LADY BETTY," "HANBURY MILLS," "HUGH CRICHTON'S  
ROMANCE," "AN ENGLISH SQUIRE," &c., &c.

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—PRESIDENT GARFIELD.

*IN THREE VOLUMES.*

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## CHAPTER XIV.

### OLD FRIENDS AND NEW.

"From the other side of the world."

"AND how about this friend of yours, Arthur? What does he want? What can he do? Have you a high opinion of him?"

Mr. Spencer Crichton and his cousin, Arthur Spencer, had spent the first morning after the latter's return from India in a long discussion of the business matters that had brought him home, and were now free both from these pressing considerations, and from the first confusion of family greetings—from the eager recognition of Arthur's smiling face and bright eyes through the black beard and bronzed complexion which at first sight altered him so much. The first

arrival was over. Already the warm welcome and hospitable attentions of his cousin's wife, whom he had last seen as the most bashful of brides, seemed natural enough. Her three pretty children were no longer mere names to him. He had had time to feel that very little change had passed over his cousin himself, except the look of unconscious ease that comes of long-continued prosperity, and that his cousin's mother was as kind and pleasant-natured an aunt as he had found her through all the years of his orphaned boyhood.

The old Bank House, known from childhood, had certainly a handsomer and better appointed appearance; but the general effect was unchanged, and the new-comer was just beginning to think how strange it was to feel so much at home, when Mr. Crichton interrupted his meditations with the foregoing questions.

"Well, Hugh, to tell you the truth, I am afraid you won't think I can give a very

satisfactory account of him. I don't quite know what you will say to the poor fellow."

"Well, tell me what *you* have to say about him," said Hugh, with a certain grave smile that was peculiar to him.

"In the first place, he was a clerk in a great shipping office in Calcutta, and he brought a fair character from them to us about three years ago. He applied for a clerkship in the bank then vacant, and we have had no cause to complain of him. He had a good salary, and was doing well, when last year he lost his wife, and I was very sorry for him. Now he has one little girl, and she is ill. They said she must die in India; so as he has no friends to send her to, he threw up everything to come to England himself. I saw a good deal of them coming home, and it occurred to me that perhaps you might find something that would do for him."

"What is his name?"

"Oakenshaw. Frederick Oakenshaw. And the little girl is called Marian."

"Well," said Hugh, "I think there is no opening in the bank at present, but the Local Board wants a clerk, I believe. I should think your three years' character would be sufficient."

"Yes, but that is absolutely *all* I know about him. He is above fifty, I should say. He is or was a gentleman, and his poor little wife was certainly not a lady. I think you had better just take a look at him yourself first."

"In short, you suspect him of being a scamp, and want to shift the recommendation on to my shoulders."

"No—but I do think he must have had what people call a history. And I think he must have been rather a loose fish until his marriage. But he was devoted to his wife, and when she died, quite suddenly, he was almost beside himself. The child is a nice little thing, and altogether I was very sorry for them."

Mr. Crichton was aware that this was not the first time that his cousin had proved a



kind friend to fellow-countrymen in trouble, and in this case the source of the sympathy was easily traced to that sad history of his own earlier years, which *must* be now especially present to his memory, though it had left little outward mark upon him. The loss of his early love had determined his choice of a life in India, and the life had proved both suitable and successful. Hugh determined that Mr. Oakenshaw should have the benefit of every doubt.

“What have you done with him?” he said.

“I sent him to the ‘Anchor’ for last night, and then he meant to look out for a lodging. Will you come and have a look at him?”

Hugh agreed, saying that they should have plenty of time before starting for Redhurst.

As they went out together their talk fell into home channels, and in noticing and pointing out the different changes and improvements they forgot Mr. Oakenshaw till they met him in the street, and Arthur, as

he introduced him, could not fail to detect a critical and disapproving expression on his cousin's face. Mr. Oakenshaw looked old for his fifty years; his features were good, but his complexion sallow and unhealthy; he was very thin, and though not badly dressed had an indescribable air of a person not quite in his right place in society. He had dark eyes, with rather a wistful and melancholy look in them, and his manner to Arthur was a little obsequious.

He explained that he was looking for a lodging for himself and his little girl, and Hugh told him of the arrangement made by his wife with Mrs. Jones, and directed him to Laurel Villa. He also asked a few questions as to Mr. Oakenshaw's experience and abilities, and, finding the answers satisfactory, mentioned the appointment to the Local Board, and the place and time at which application could be made. The Board, of which he was himself the chairman, would give full weight to Mr. Spencer's recommendation.

A more genuine and pleasing expression came into Mr. Oakenshaw's face.

"Mr. Spencer has been a very kind friend," he said, abruptly. "My little girl won't forget it—nor I either."

"Ah, how is little Minnie?" said Arthur. "Pretty well? That is right. I must come and see her when you are settled in—in Laurel Terrace. I am sure Mrs. Jones will be very kind to her."

"*You* have been kind," said Mr. Oakenshaw; and then he turned to Hugh, and said in a more ordinary manner, "I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Spencer Crichton, for your information. I shall certainly apply to the Local Board at the time you name, when I must, of course, stand my chance with other candidates."

"I like him better than I did at first," said Hugh, as they parted, "His appearance is against him. Oakenshaw? There are some Oakenshaws in Warwickshire, I believe. Perhaps he belongs to them."

"I am afraid, poor fellow, that he was

once somebody's black sheep," returned Arthur, "but he did very well for us, and I am sure he does not drink, so I don't see why he should not have a chance of living respectably. So we are to go to Redhurst this afternoon?" he added, changing the subject.

"Yes—that is if you like it."

"I should like it of all things."

"Now tell me about every one."

He asked a good many questions about old friends and neighbours; but he experienced a certain sense of strangeness. He did not care as vividly about seeing them as they supposed; his own life during the last seven years was much more important to him—much more present to him than any one imagined. The first warmth of their welcome almost surprised him. The constant attempt to put away an old pain seemed as if it had been almost too successful. For a long time he had never dared to picture these old scenes to himself, and the new interests, such as they were, had grown almost too completely into their

place. Arthur did not feel as if there would be much pain left in any old associations. They had none of them quite believed him when he had written to them that he was quite content with his Indian life; but it had been perfectly true. He had always been a person who lived in the present, and did not think of his own sensations till he experienced them; and his feelings were much more that of an ordinary pleasant home-coming, than his friends, who remembered vividly how Mysie Crofton's terrible fate had once shaken his nerves and crushed his spirits, could realise. The past was far more present to the cousin who had never forgotten his own share in that grievous loss, nor through all his own prosperity had ceased to feel a special obligation to shelter Arthur from all possible pain. He could hardly trust Arthur's apparent enjoyment of the afternoon's drive to Redhurst, for how often in those old days had not bright words and looks veiled a very sad heart? There was much, however, to talk of. The young

brother and sister, whom Arthur had left as boy and girl, were, the one with his regiment in Canada, the other married in a distant county, so that Mrs. Spencer Crichton, having no longer the companionship of the niece whom she had brought up, had begged her son and his wife to make their home with her, and this projected change formed a subject of conversation as they drank afternoon tea in the old drawing-room, and looked out on the familiar garden still bright with late autumn flowers.

But it was with an unconscious return to an old habit of confidence that Arthur said afterwards to his cousin :

“Hugh, if you don’t mind I think I should like to walk home by myself.”

“Certainly. And, Arthur, you will always tell me when I can make things easier for you?”

“Ah,” said Arthur, smiling, “but you will always find out. But there is nothing that I mind. It is very pleasant to be at home again.”

He nodded as he spoke, and walked away towards the little churchyard, to the quiet corner where his lost love was buried. There, in the yellow light of the low autumn sun, was the white cross on which Marian Crofton's name was written; at its foot lay a bright wreath of autumn flowers. Just so had Arthur seen it last—just so had his memory pictured it.

He stood still, with a sense of deep tenderness, of a beautiful memory that was sweeter than the memory of joy, or rather, it was the memory of a joy that seemed to have an unearthly perfection. That early love, that brief summer betrothal, were like a lovely dream, and there was no sharp present pain to make Arthur think of himself without her rather than of the perfect thing that she had been to him.

He turned away presently, and walked through the fields back towards Oxley. He looked out half-unconsciously for each familiar spot—for the hedge where the blackberries ripened first, for the field

where the cowslips grew, for the view of the river, for the stile where he had been wont to meet her as she came from school ; but here he paused, puzzled ; the path was gone, the fields were altered. He was face to face with a new and stony road, and with a row of little villas. Arthur started from his dream of the past to a sudden sense of a new and uncomfortable present. The pretty fields were only half-turned into roads and gardens, the hedges were but half destroyed, and the melancholy sense of the destruction of the old rural peace was stronger than any feeling of new suburban cheerfulness. As Arthur looked indignantly round, out of the gate of one of the new villas came a tall young lady, in a berry-trimmed hat, with bright hair and a rosy complexion.

“Flossy !” exclaimed Arthur, “oh, what have they been doing to the old place ?”

She gave a great start as he grasped her hand, and as she did not at once speak, he went on——



“Don’t you know me? You knew I was here?”

“I knew you were coming, but I did not see you till you spoke. How are you? I am not quite sure if I should have known you or not!” said Florence hurriedly, and perhaps not *quite* truly.

“Well, I should have known you in Calcutta. You have not altered in the least. I thought nothing was altered till I found myself in this desert,” said Arthur, rather inappropriately.

“Yes, it is a great pity. But, if you remember, this bit of land belonged to Mr. Mapleson, the builder, and since the railway came he has begun to run up these little houses. They let directly.”

“Oh yes; I remember these are the fields that Mapleson would never let any of us buy. I don’t know how to get out,” said Arthur, in an injured tone, as he looked round him.

“That stony road is where the stile used to be. It ends in our fields, and there is

an opening now into the main road, across the line. Yes, that's the railway," as a whistle was heard, followed by the rush of the train near at hand.

He stood looking up the stony road in silence, till a child's voice exclaimed: "Mr. Spencer!" and, looking round he saw Mr. Oakenshaw approaching from the main road, leading his little girl by the hand.

"What, is *this* Laurel Terrace?" said Arthur, amazed. "Why, Minnie, I have just been wishing to knock your new house down again."

"Oh, Mr. Spencer! It is such a dear little house! We have been to look at it, and we came to it down such a pretty little road. We have been walking about since right across the railway. Won't you come and see it?"

"Not to-day, I think—another time. Let me show you to this lady. Perhaps she would be so *very* kind as to come one day and see you. These were fellow-

passengers of mine, Miss Venning—Mr. Oakenshaw and his little girl.”

“Then I think they must be Mrs. Jones’s new lodgers,” said Florence, looking kindly at the child, a pretty, delicate-featured little creature, with auburn hair and bright eyes. “I think you *are* going to live in a pretty little house, and I shall be very glad to come and see you.”

Mr. Oakenshaw thanked Arthur civilly for recommending the lodging, bowed to Miss Venning, and walked on with the child, who shouted after them to Arthur, “Mind you come.”

“Little Minnie is a noisy specimen,” he said, “but she is a jolly little thing.” He added an explanation of Oakenshaw’s search for a situation and his chance of obtaining one; and Florence promised to keep an eye on Minnie, and to interest the kind landlady in the little motherless girl.

They parted at the turn to the main road, and Arthur paused, held her hand for a moment, and said in a different tone:

"I must thank you for those flowers."

"And Violante," she said very low.

"Ah yes? Thanks—many times."

He turned away as he spoke, and Florence was glad, for the meeting had come about very differently from her expectations, and had cost something to her self-control.

Meanwhile, Mr. Oakenshaw having removed his few goods to Laurel Terrace, and left Minnie in charge of Mrs. Jones, strolled out in his turn to look about him, and to take the measure of his new neighbourhood. He, too, had been an Englishman once, though many more than seven years had elapsed since he had walked about the streets of an English town, or seen the sober brightness of an English autumn. What memories of his youth were brought to light by scenes, familiar in character if not in fact? Did the russet woods and the bright though cloudy sky bring back to him also thoughts of a vanished youth? The fresh keen air and

the soft blue distances seemed to please him, for he walked through the woods to the top of the hill behind Ashenfold, from which there was a wide view of the surrounding country, over copses and corn-fields, right away over pleasant Fairfield to the high-standing elms of Willingham.

He soon obtained the situation for which Mr. Crichton had recommended him to apply, and, whatever his previous station and habits had been, settled in quietly to his clerkship, made a very quiet lodger for Mrs. Jones, and sent his little girl to a day school recommended by Miss Venning. Arthur Spencer looked in on him now and then of an evening, and Minnie was invited once or twice to drink tea in Mr. Spencer Crichton's nursery. But the Oakenshaws excited no sensation in Oxley; while, on the other hand, Mr. Spencer's return was the occasion of a great deal of gaiety and of many friendly meetings. He was always

a pleasant and popular person, and his intentions in coming home and the probability of his marriage were generally discussed.



## CHAPTER XV.

### SHADOWS FROM THE PAST.

“And ghosts unseen crept in between,  
And marred our harmonies.”

THE gaieties of Oxley culminated early in January with an annual charity ball in the town hall, to be immediately preceded by a dance given by Mrs. Spencer, of Redhurst, in honour of the change of residence of her eldest son and his wife. Arthur Spencer, who had spent the time of the move with his married sister in Northumberland, returned in time for it, and a great frost taking place at the time added skating to the list of amusements. Florence Venning, whose sister was away for the holidays, invited Dulcie to come and stay with her; and as neither Captain nor Mrs. Fordham were particularly fond of late hours they were glad of an arrangement which put

her under the charge of the Redhurst ladies. Redhurst was filled up by the married children and by visitors for the ball, so it was proposed that Arthur Spencer should entertain all the young men at the Bank House, Geoffrey Leighton and his brother Alick among the number. Annie Macdonald was to stay at Redhurst.

Florence Venning spent the autumn months in her usual round of vigorously performed duties, for though her sister would not consent to being spared the need of any special teacher, there was not a department in the school in which her presence was not felt; and it was her influence that was spoken of as so specially advantageous to growing girlhood. Outside the school, too, she was an efficient helper in many good works and undertakings; and the business-like habits and dignified decision of manner, which she had perhaps acquired from her half-professional training, sometimes made the neighbours forget, in spite of her fresh energies and blooming



good looks, that she was still a "young lady" after all.

Not that Florence had dropped any of the pursuits or amusements of girlhood, but at home she had too much to do to make them an object, and people acquiesced readily in her supposed superiority to them.

Florence had never hitherto troubled herself as to the light in which she might be regarded. What came to her hand she did with all her might, and, though perhaps rather fond of her own way, and confident in her own powers, her own self was the last subject which she spent her time in considering. Now she suddenly began to have misgivings as to the effect on a person's own character of constantly endeavouring to influence others. Perhaps the return of a friend of much earlier years naturally conduced to these reflections. When Arthur Spencer had been her companion she had been a vehement, eager girl, with all her present tastes in

the bud, and had been frequently teased and laughed at for her overpowering energies.

Very few people in Oxley laughed at Miss Florence now.

"Why, Flossy," Arthur had said, shortly after his return, when she had been forced to refuse an invitation on the ground of a "G.F.S." Committee, or something equally unintelligible to the Anglo-Indian, "why, Flossy, you have become quite a formidable personage."

"Oh, Arthur, don't say such a thing!" she had exclaimed, with cheeks as pink and voice as vehement as ever could have been found in the Flossy of old.

Arthur had only intended a very innocent joke; but the words recurred to Florence's memory over and over again.

They had been boy and girl together, and she had rejoiced in his engagement to her favourite friend and playfellow, and then had grieved both for and with him in

his great grief. But in the year that followed, when she had been his comforter and confidante, her feelings towards him had grown and changed. Dreamy and undeveloped, and utterly without thought of a return, as this romance of her youth had been, it had cost her pain and self-suppression, which she had recognised with clear good sense, and faced with high courage. Nor had her life been really saddened by it. Now Arthur was here again, with nothing to mark him out from other men. His marriage was wondered about, and wished for by all his relations save his cousin Hugh. His aunt, warm-hearted and full of benevolent plans, never asked a girl to play lawn-tennis without a thought of the possible consequences to Arthur. He himself was as friendly to Florence as ever ; and she was in the habit of being often at the Bank House, so that busy as she was, she had seen a good deal of him, and she had blissful moments and sorrowful hours, and suddenly fancied, or

found out, she couldn't tell which, that classes and committees were of very small importance. But she controlled herself with all the strength which the habits of her life had given her, and neither sought Arthur nor avoided him. As a girl she had faced the fact that her love-story was not likely to be joyous; as a woman she was equally determined that there should be nothing in it of which she could have cause to be ashamed.

About two o'clock on the day appointed for the dance at Redhurst, Geoffrey arrived at Oxley station, and, according to agreement, took his way at once to the flooded field, which was just now the centre of attraction.

Geoffrey was in high spirits. He had had a private interview with a great personage, and the Government Inspectorship might be almost considered as secure. He was also, as ever, very fond of amusement, and he liked the prospect both of skating and dancing. And Dulcie would be there

and she was not only the lady of his love but the most delightful comrade he had ever known—better to talk to, better to listen to than any one else. Geoffrey sped along the hard road, his skates swinging from his hand; the sharp sunny air, and the gay yet delicate colouring of a frosty day in the country, unconsciously adding to his exhilaration. There was scarcely a touch of snow, the hoar frost had melted on the southern banks, ivy and evergreens were alive and shining, the copses and the larger tree-trunks showed every variety of tint against the pale blue sky. Geoffrey heard the ring of the skates and the voices of the skaters long before he came out on to the raised path at one side of the field, and saw the ice, dark, smooth and promising, beneath him.

The field was very large, and was nearly covered with skaters, while a few spectators were walking up and down the raised path, at one end of which was a smart little striped tent, containing seats and probably refresh-

ments of some kind. Geoffrey had only a schoolboy's knowledge of his hosts, but he soon saw his brother's tall figure at the further end of the field, and presently after, Dulcie, holding by the hand a tall young lady, with fair hair and rosy face, came skating rather timidly towards him.

"Ah, there you are!" she cried, "I thought the train must be coming. This is Miss Florence Venning; she is teaching me to skate."

Dulcie's hat and dress were trimmed with soft grey fur, her eyes were shining and her cheeks glowing; she seemed all alive with enjoyment and animation.

Geoffrey acknowledged the introduction, and said that he hoped Dulcie was a promising pupil.

"Pretty well," said Florence, laughing; "I think she is just a little bit of a coward. Perhaps now she will gain confidence."

"Every one has been very kind in teaching me," said Dulcie, "but I shall never

skate as you and Annie do. But I like it—oh, so much!”

Geoffrey had now put his skates on, and took Dulcie by the hand, while Florence turned away to speak to an acquaintance.

“Come, give me the map of the country,” said Geoffrey. “Where’s Mr. Spencer? He is to be my host, isn’t he?”

“Yes. There he is, with a black beard, and a stick in his hand. Don’t you see he is speaking to some one—a man something like your father, isn’t he, Geoff?—with a little girl jumping up and down beside him. I declare his back quite reminds me of Mr. Leighton’s.”

“What, there? Father wouldn’t be flattered; but I make out Spencer now. He is giving the child a slide.”

“Yes, he is very good-natured. He gave me a long lesson yesterday. Ah, there he comes.”

Arthur, now perceiving Dulcie’s companion, came up with a very cordial greeting, and begged him to find his way to the Bank House whenever he liked.

"For I may be in fifty places at once," he added; "but we are all to dine together at seven, before going out to Redhurst. My cousins will be here soon; they were to drive over later."

"Thanks," said Geoffrey; "I sent on my things to the Bank House, and my brother and I will make our way there together."

"There are our champion lady skaters," said Arthur,—*"Miss Florence Venning and Miss Macdonald; don't they skate well?"*

"Oh, yes," said Dulcie; "but Miss Florence does everything well."

"Doesn't she?" said Arthur, with a pleased look. "I tell her that her capabilities are quite appalling. But I must go and find some skates for poor old Oakenshaw; I fancy he would like a turn."

Arthur sped away towards the bank, and Geoffrey said:

"Yes, *I* admire Miss Venning. I think she is a very good friend for you, and you may learn a great deal from her."



"Oh, I do," said Dulcie. "But just now, Geoff, I want to learn to skate. And what a delicious time we are having! How happy every one looks. I think I never enjoyed myself so much."

As she held his hand and skimmed along by his side, her slender figure full of joyous life, and her face shining and beaming in the clear sparkling sunshine, she seemed to her young lover like joy incarnate, something that no heart had ever depicted, no fancy ever conceived. No Greek ideal of Pagan peace could have held in her eyes such possibilities of infinite rapture, no northern elf or fairy was ever so sweet or so human, and assuredly, no mystical modern angel or goddess ever looked so bright or so fair.

"Dulcie," he exclaimed, with abrupt and passionate vehemence, "you beautiful creature! You are the loveliest of created things!"

"Oh, Geoff! Geoff! The air *must* be like champagne, as some one said it was yesterday."

"It is happiness that makes you so lovely. There are times when you transcend yourself."

"Well," said Dulcie, who had paused at this overwhelming compliment and now stood looking at him with eyes that smiled at his extravagance, "there are times when I feel transcendent. Geoff, sometimes I think if the great temptations of life could only take one at the right moment they wouldn't be temptations at all."

Dulcie and Geoffrey were quite young enough to find it easy to combine skating and metaphysics, and to spring with a bound from compliments to casuistry.

"What do you mean by the temptations of life?" said Geoffrey.

"I mean those times when it matters a great deal how one behaves, when one particularly wants a 'right judgment.'"

Geoffrey's brows drew together, and his fair face set hard.

"I think it is more true to say that there are times when they would be quite sure

to overcome one," he said. Then suddenly and abruptly, "You are fond of discussing hackneyed subjects. Would you rather that any one belonging to you died or was disgraced?"

"Why, died, of course!" answered Dulcie, as any girl would.

But then she looked at her lover, and the sad story of the pair who had been parted by death flashed into her mind. Could, after all, any parting be like that of death! Never to see Geoffrey—never to hear him speak, or feel his hand! It was the sudden test of practice applied to belief. She tightened her clasp, and her eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, my dear, I am afraid I am not quite sure!" she said.

She, who had never before felt even pity for those who did not hold to the heroic side, suddenly she knew that she might have tied the white scarf on the Huguenot, shut the door on the warrior, held back the martyr from the stake.

"Not sure, Dulcie!" cried Geoffrey. "How can you say such a thing? If there is one thing I am sure of, it is that no suffering equals shame. I never could understand how torture was successful!"

"Is Miss Fordham proposing any experiments of the kind?" chimed in Arthur Spencer, coming up with Florence Venning and Annie Macdonald.

"Oh," said Geoffrey, with more self-consciousness, "we are fond of casuistical discussions. This is a very old one. Miss Fordham thinks it would be possible to prefer the disgrace of a—a friend to their death. I say, it is a far more entire separation. Miss Venning, you do not teach her to doubt it?"

"You see," said Arthur, after a moment's pause, "it is not generally a matter of choice."

"It might be," said Geoffrey. "There are plenty of typical instances."

"Yes," said Florence, "and *some* typical people. We are not all heroes and heroines."

"Well," said Annie, "people *say* that virtue is its own reward; but for my part *I* never found a bad conscience—and I often have one—half so unpleasant as doing one's duty always is."

Geoffrey looked as if this remark was beneath contempt, and Arthur said, half smiling :

"Isn't it rather cold to stand here discussing abstract subjects?"

"Yes, Geoffrey," said Dulcie. "I told you I wanted to skate."

"Come then," said Geoffrey, and they started on their joint career.

"Oh, Geoff," she cried, "I can't go so fast yet! Your pace is frightful."

"Geoff always did skate like the man with the cork leg," said Alick, joining them. "Are you going to pull Dulcie off her feet in that fashion all through life? Hold on to me, Dulcie, and I'll watch over you like a mother. Let him go."

"Do, Geoff. I want to see you," said Dulcie.

"Well, just to warm myself," said Geoffrey; "but the only way to gain confidence is to go at it as hard as you can."

"There he goes, just like the Double Dutchman!" said Alick. "The crowds divide before him. I don't think it's good form to skate as if you were racing! There he is on the other side. No, that's another rocket, rather an unsteady one though. It's Oakenshaw; no doubt he is out of practice. I declare I thought it was Geoff."

"Who is Oakenshaw?" asked Dulcie.

"A *protégé* of Spencer's. He brought him back with him from India. Well, he has got his feet in a wonderfully short time. How he spins along!"

"I told Geoffrey that I thought that man was like your father. How odd that you should mistake him for Geoff."

"There is no likeness, really," said Alick. "It was only his pace. Bravo, Dulcie, you are making progress. Take it easy at first is the way."

"Let us go grandly, and meet Geoff," she said.

As Geoffrey came spinning at full speed towards them, he called out :

"Splendid ice; it's in first-rate condition."

And Arthur Spencer coming up behind caught the echo of his voice, and said :

"How are you getting on, Oakenshaw? Ah! I beg your pardon, Mr. Leighton. I mistook your voice for some one else's."

Geoffrey paused, and looked after Arthur, who skated past them with Annie Macdonald. Alick looked too, and saw them stop and speak to Mr. Oakenshaw, who was now moderating his ardour and letting his little girl run by his side. They were near enough to hear him answer Arthur, in brisk, lively tones :

"Oh, yes, Mr. Spencer, I was a great skater once, and the knack never quite leaves one. There's no fool like an old fool they say, and the sport is almost *worth* breaking one's bones for."

Alick's thoughts were easily traceable as he remarked in a melancholy tone :

"What an *awfully* good-looking fellow Spencer is! And he skates so well too."

"Every one says Charlie Osgood is equal to an American," said Dulcie. "And no wonder, for he is so mad about it that he has come over from Willingham every day by train to get this good ice."

Geoffrey did not answer. He watched Oakenshaw round the field. This was not the first time in his life that Geoffrey had been haunted by a likeness, terrified by a possibility.

He well remembered, it seemed on looking back for half his childhood, how there was one particular man who sat in a particular corner of the church which they attended, with a pale face and long nose, whom he had fancied like his father. Geoffrey always believed that that man kept his eye on them, and watched them during the sermon with a melancholy expression. None of the others had ever appeared to be aware



of his existence; but he had been the haunting bugbear of Geoffrey's early boyhood. Then, what had he not gone through when strangers wanted to see Mr. Leighton on business, and Mr. Leighton appeared preoccupied after the interview? Once, two great coats and three umbrellas had disappeared, because Geoffrey could not bring himself to mention that he had seen an unaccountable man in the hall. Even at school there was a certain thin inhabitant of Oxley who had been "in the colonies," and who lived in a small lodging, and had no apparent reason for his existence, whom Geoffrey never quite liked to think of. He never saw any one from America or Australia without a half fear of whom they might have met on their travels. He had imagined likenesses many times before. Surely, he thought, he had outgrown that kind of folly. But his eyes followed the rapid skating of the man for whose voice his own had been mistaken. He did not know that Alick had also mis-

taken his figure. Mr. Oakenshaw, seen thus, looked many years younger, and much brighter than on his first return. He looked a gentleman, and as he called out to his little girl, who was playing with some schoolfellows, his voice sounded loud, cheerful, and, to Geoffrey's excited ears, familiar. He did not know but what Mr. Oakenshaw was a perfectly well-known inhabitant of Oxley, till Dulcie remarked on the wonder of his skating, and having heard his history from Florence, repeated it for Geoffrey's benefit. She little knew how it fell on his ear. He was never a person who could speak of his troubles, and even Dulcie knew nothing of all his fears and fancies. He went on skating, laughing and talking, with the old unreal yet most tormenting fear haunting him through all his enjoyment; while Mr. Oakenshaw was making the most of the hour that he had snatched from his work, to give Minnie the treat of seeing the skaters. He had not expected such a return to old habits for

himself. He knew no one present but Arthur Spencer, and Miss Venning, who had patronised his child, but it amused him to see once more a gathering of English ladies and gentlemen. He did not especially notice Geoffrey, but when he saw Charles Osgood's beautiful skating, and was told his name, he gave an odd laugh to himself, and tried to execute the old feats of former years.

Meanwhile, a break had arrived in the road, containing the remainder of the Redhurst party—the two Mrs. Crichtons and various ladies who were staying in the house.

A pic-nic basket was also taken out, and it presently appeared that Mrs. Crichton had tea in the tent for all her acquaintances, after which she meant to carry off her own party to rest before the evening.

“I had better go and bring people up, hadn't I, Aunt Lily?” said Arthur, who had come to meet them. “Some of these fellows ought to be introduced to you.”

"Yes, do, my dear. What a pretty sight it is!" said Mrs. Crichton, who always enjoyed pleasant gatherings. "But I should think all our party would rejoice in some tea."

"It seems rather hard-hearted to drink it with so many people looking on," said her daughter-in-law.

"I am afraid we can't quite give tea to all Oxley," said Arthur, who had returned with Florence, Dulcie, and the Leightons. "Won't you come and have a turn, Violante?"

"Thank you, but I don't like the ice. I never saw any, you see, when *I* was young. I would rather give Miss Fordham and Flossy some tea," said Violante, smiling.

Dulcie, who had a great admiration for Violante's soft dark eyes and gentle foreign tones, was pleased at this decision, and having by this time had enough of skating, sat down in the shelter of the tent and looked on, while the rest of the party disposed themselves on rugs on the bank, or

on a bench which had been placed on the ice for the convenience of the skaters.

"Is it quite safe, so near the edge?" said Violante.

"Yes," answered Arthur, "at this end. There, where the pond is, it is not safe at all. You see there is a post put up."

"Why, Arthur," said Mrs. Crichton, looking across the field, "is that Mr. Oakenshaw? Is the Local Board frozen out?"

"I believe he has managed to get an hour somehow. It seems to be a return to a youthful passion. Don't grudge the poor fellow a little amusement, Aunt Lily."

"He came to England because his little girl was ill, didn't he? She seems lively enough now," said Mrs. Crichton.

"She is a *very* noisy child," said Florence, "and rather wilful; but there is something refined about her face. Do you see her running along in front of those other children? I can hear her shouting and calling."

"I'll pick her up and bring her to have a cake," said Arthur.

The little girl ran on along the ice, half sliding, half running, her long hair flying behind her, and her merry voice calling and crying, "Come on! come on! You won't catch me!"—when suddenly her shout changed into an awful cry, a scream of terror, as, before Arthur could reach her, she rushed on to the dangerous corner of the ice; it cracked, and gave way beneath her, and she disappeared.

"Back! back! Stand back!" shouted Arthur. "I know the ground. Hold off! it's all right!"

The ice gave way in a moment beneath his weight with a great splash and crash, as the two Leightons and a dozen others followed him, but held back at his warning; while the outcry of "Child in the water!" and the screams of the other children, brought the poor father flying to the spot. He would have been in the water in another moment, but Alick threw both arms round

him. Arthur gained his feet at the bottom of the pond, caught Minnie as she rose to the surface, and held her head above water; while Geoffrey, light of foot and limb, skimmed close enough to throw himself at full length on the ice, and drag her out of Arthur's arms—senseless from the shock and the chill—for she had been hardly a minute in the water. Her father, sobbing and quite beside himself with terror, seized on her with an outcry of :

“Oh, my darling! She's gone—she's quite gone! She'll never stand it.”

“No such thing,” said the vicar of Oxley, who had been among the skaters; “she'll be all right in a minute. Take her into the tent. Mrs. Crichton, you'll allow us?”

Here he forcibly took Minnie himself, wrapped the cloak round her which some one put into his hand, and delivered her over to the ladies; while Alick, who had all this while retained his hold on Oakenshaw, uncertain as to what he would do next, induced him to sit down on the bench,

and allow himself to be divested of his skates before following her.

In the meantime, Arthur, though in no danger of drowning, had considerable difficulty, between the mud and the broken ice, in getting out of the water, and was forced to break away the ice towards the bank, where he knew the pond ended. On his other side, where it was fed by a spring, it was deep and dangerous, and he was forced to warn off his helpers, and at last pulled himself up on to the steep bank, where he sat for a moment breathless and almost spent with the excessive chill and the exertion.

"You must not sit still! Can you stand? Shall I help you?" said Geoffrey, who was nearest to him.

"Thanks—my skates. Can you get rid of them? But the child—how is she? I shall be right in a minute."

The skates fastened with springs, and were soon disposed of, and Arthur soon gained his feet, as Alick came back to



them, saying: "She's coming round. She isn't hurt. They were afraid at first she might have struck her head against the ice."

"Oh, no, she did not," said Arthur; "I thought of that all the time."

"Spencer!" cried one of the other bystanders, "you are as white as a sheet! Come and get some of the hot coffee they have there, and get home and change your things at once."

"Rather too much iced water!" said Arthur, still rather dreamily, as they came towards the tent, where Minnie was heard sobbing most reassuringly; while the vicar's voice was heard to say—

"Now then, my good fellow, leave her to the ladies, and come outside and compose yourself. Mrs. Crichton will drive her back in a minute."

And he fairly hauled Mr. Oakenshaw out on to the bank, when, the poor man, still in much agitation, seeing Arthur, rushed at him and seized his hand.

"How can I thank you? Always my best friend. She is alive. I thought I should never see her eyes open again. If you knew the agony of such a moment!"

"I'm very glad she's safe," said Arthur gently. "Thank you," as Alick put the coffee into his hand. "That's famous stuff."

But he let the empty cup fall, and forgot to notice it, as the vicar carried Minnie, wrapped in Mrs. Crichton's fur cloak, her long wet hair hanging over his shoulder, to the break. Arthur shuddered from head to foot—a dazed, confused feeling came over him, the past seemed to blot out the present. The clinging garments, the drenched hair, the struggle in the water, brought upon him a dreadful sense of repetition. He recovered himself with a desperate effort. Other people might be recalled to painful memories if they saw how much he had been upset.

"I think I'll get home as fast as I can," he said to Geoffrey. "Will you come with me? you are wet as well—"

“Yes, it’s much too cold to stand about. Your coat is positively stiff already, and mine too. In one moment.”

He dashed back for half a word to Dulcie, and then Arthur, glad of having only the company of an ignorant stranger, walked off as fast as his half-frozen garments and his chilled limbs would let him, towards the Bank House.



## CHAPTER XVI.

### AT THE REDHURST BALL.

“ You’ll come—won’t you come—to our ball ? ”

FOR most of the bystanders the terror had hardly been felt before it was over. Dulcie had scarcely time for the shock and horror before she saw little Minnie safe in Geoffrey’s arms, and the child when brought into the tent began to sob and struggle as they removed her drenched clothes, leaving them in no doubt that the life was in her. Dulcie eagerly helped Violante to undress the poor little thing, wrap her up warmly, give her hot drink, coax her and soothe her ; while the elder Mrs. Crichton at once scolded and encouraged her father, who seemed as much beside himself as the child. The fright had evidently put Minnie in a passion ; and as her strength returned, she tried to struggle

away from Violante's soft clasp ; and though she cried for her daddy, fought him off when he tried to administer some coffee, evidently under the impression that it was nasty medicine. She made a great noise, and deprived the scene of any sentimental interest, though her behaviour reassured her father considerably.

Florence, at the first alarm, had run down the bank with an instinct of going to the rescue, but had backed at Arthur's imperative order, seeing in a moment that the child was safe, but that he was in difficulties, and knowing the pond well enough to see why.

"Oh, mind the hole!" she cried, but no one heard her, and then she saw his eyes follow Minnie, and felt the association for him more than he felt it for himself. Dulcie ran up to her, saying that Mr. Spencer was dreadfully wet and half-frozen, and that Geoffrey had gone home with him. Should they go back to the Manor too?

The Redhurst party drove off in the

break with little Minnie, and Florence agreed that they had better go home.

"Were you frightened?" said Dulcie, seeing how pale she was.

"There was no time," said Florence. "But—but—you know he tried to save *her*, and carried her home in his arms. He must have felt it—— Never mind," she added hurriedly. "Don't you linger about in the cold, dear, but come in and have some more tea, and then I will go and inquire for Minnie."

As Florence carried out this wish she met Geoffrey Leighton, who told her that as Mr. Spencer seemed anxious about the child he had come to inquire for her.

"I thought that he should not come out again in the cold."

"Certainly not," said Florence. "I hope he won't have caught cold already."

"He seems all right," answered Geoffrey. "But he takes an interest, he says, in these people, and I was very glad to come and enquire."

In the excitement of his share of the rescue Geoffrey had forgotten his previous impressions of Mr. Oakenshaw, till Arthur, on the way back, by way of conversation and to divert his own mind, had told him the history of his connection with his late clerk.

It fitted in with Geoffrey's fears, and it was with a sort of daring of his fate that he came to look for him. Still, never had those fears seemed so unreal and fanciful as when he was brought into actual contact with the object of them; and while Florence ran up stairs to look at Minnie, he was receiving grateful messages from her father for Arthur, and many thanks for himself. Mr. Oakenshaw was composed now, and spoke sensibly and pleasantly. Was there any reality in the odd sense of familiarity that seemed to creep over Geoffrey as he talked? Was there an air of kindred in the tones, in the smile—that indescribable something that is often felt in the company of a strange kinsman, even if

by no means a near relation? Something (what could he say—was it all fancy?) in the gesture with which this stranger leaned back in his seat, and pushed his hand up through his hair, as he said—

“You gave my little one back to me, sir. May I ask your name? You are not, I think, a resident in Oxley?”

Geoffrey faced him, then suddenly turned and looked into the fire.

“My name’s Geoffrey Leighton,” he said, “and I live in Chelsea. My father is Mr. James Leighton, a barrister; you may have heard the name?”

Geoffrey felt that to look would cure his nervous fancy, but he could not look lest he should confirm it. There was a moment’s pause, but he did not learn what story that pause might have to tell.

“Leighton? Yes, I think I may have heard the name. Thank you, Mr. Leighton. Ah, Miss Venning, you find my little girl quite herself again.”

“Yes, I think so. You can tell Mr.



Spencer so, Mr. Leighton. There is no reason to be uneasy now."

She shook hands as she spoke with Mr. Oakenshaw, and, under the circumstances, Geoffrey would naturally have followed her example. Indeed, instinct made him put out his hand, but Mr. Oakenshaw only bowed to him, and either his countenance changed suddenly, or Geoffrey fancied so. He hurried back to dinner, very little in tune for the lively conversation of the young Fordhams, Osgoods, and others who were dining at the Bank House. Arthur Spencer looked a little pale and tired, evidently playing host with some effort—and natural as this was, Geoffrey was half suspicious of his more languid manner, and of the downcast air observable in Alick, though Geoffrey might have guessed that this was owing to Miss Macdonald's rather marked avoidance of him on the ice. Geoffrey talked so much and so vehemently that he really did attract Arthur's attention, and cause him to think this young Leighton

a very odd and excitable fellow; but there was not much time for observations, for they all started early for Redhurst, and arrived there in time to welcome the first arrivals. Geoffrey noticed with some surprise that nothing was said publicly about the afternoon's adventure—only, as he greeted them, Mr. Crichton shot an anxious inquiring glance at his cousin, which Arthur answered with a little nod and smile.

Redhurst festivities were always successful. Floor, lights, and music were all such as the most ardent dancers could desire. The elder Mrs. Crichton was a thoroughly kind and charming hostess, with tact and manners which made every stray young man feel himself a favoured guest; the younger was perfectly gracious and sweet, and by far the loveliest lady in the room. Giving balls was not much in her husband's line, but Arthur Spencer was, in both senses of the word, a host in himself, and managed wonderfully to keep the ball going. So eager was he that his aunt's ball should

answer her expectations, that he hardly found out that he was putting a strain on himself, and that the vision of the afternoon's event recurred at every unoccupied moment. But for some of the others there was a skeleton at the feast. Dulcie, looking her prettiest in blush-rose pink, was dimly conscious, though Geoffrey danced, talked, and laughed, that something was amiss with him ; while for him, black care, in the shape of Frederick Oakenshaw, was his partner, instead of his little sweetheart. Alick could not get Annie to dance with him, though she could find dances to spare for Arthur Spencer, and he heard them complimenting each other on their skill. She was very popular, with her bright hair and air of distinction, and a black gown, plainer and shabbier than Alick guessed, freshened up as it was with the cleverest arrangement of holly. Florence Venning, too, with her fresh cheeks and stately figure, set off by a handsome dress of pale blue silk, was popular and admired, yet she

looked with a little melancholy superiority at the younger girls spinning about her. Gay dresses and light hearts, she thought, were the portion of youth ; yet it is doubtful if any dress had been chosen so carefully as Miss Flossy's, or if any one had thought more about the ball at Redhurst. But she was first anxious about Arthur, and secondly, considerably put out with him. Years before, when hearts had been light and spirits high, to be teased by Arthur had been the natural counterpoise to her graver occupations. She had never then resented being called a blue-stocking, or minded being laughed at either for her schemes or for her learning. But Arthur did not laugh at her now ; had he not talked to her through a whole dinner party soon after his return about Indian missions, asking her opinion, and only deferentially correcting it when his own happened to differ ? Arthur's sentiments on the subject were excellent, and Florence ought to have been delighted at the choice of a subject, since she managed

a working party for India, and induced her scholars to support an Indian child. Yet somehow she wished Arthur would have talked of something nearer home. But now, as she stood by Dulcie for a moment, he came up and said, mischievously :

“Flossy, I begin to think that I haven’t treated you with sufficient respect. I wanted to introduce young Hargrave to you, but he declines ; don’t be hurt—he doesn’t feel himself equal to the occasion ; he is afraid of a lady who writes books, and is so clever !”

Flossy laughed, rather unsuccessfully.

“I don’t care about dancing,” she said, hurriedly.

“Too frivolous ? Ah, no wonder ! There are old Dr. Osgood and Mr. Blandford have got into a corner to talk shop, and I heard the latter mention ‘Miss Florence Venning’s opinion’ in tones of the deepest respect !”

Florence’s blush was so fiery that it struck Arthur with surprise, and rather an odd look came into his eyes as he watched

her. But he did not ask her to dance, as she had declared that she did not care to do so, and the striking up of the music obliged him to hurry away, as Dulcie said:

“What can bring Dr. Osgood to a ball, Miss Florence?”

“Oh, you know he has become quite lively since he was Master of St. Jude’s.” said Florence. “And Dulcie,” she added, rather pettishly, “do drop ‘Miss Florence.’ Why must one be a schoolmistress in the holidays?”

“But don’t you know that it is like a pet name to us all, ‘Miss Florence.’ But I shall like to call you Flossy, if I may.”

“Why not?” said Florence.

She fell a prey to Mr. Blandford as supper was announced, but not before, in spite of her ‘superiority,’ she had had leisure to feel herself uncommonly silly. She reasserted herself by being lively and pleasant to her companion as she found herself at supper near the end of a long table where Arthur

was carving turkey and making himself agreeable to Mrs. Stafford, who still liked partners and attention, and as the head master's wife had a claim on them; Alick, with a sunnier face than usual, for at last he had Annie by his side, Geoffrey and Dulcie were squeezed together at the corner. Geoffrey frowned when he saw his neighbours, for he had never ceased to hate Mrs. Stafford, and just now she especially jarred upon him; and Alick's cheerful "Won't you take some salad, cousin Rosie?" perfectly aggravated him. Even the presence of Dr. Osgood was an element of annoyance, as he waited on the ladies with old-fashioned courtesies, and observed that such ardent votaries of Terpsichore must require a little refreshment.

Wherever Mrs. Stafford was she was always a centre, and now she was bent on being agreeable to the good-looking Mr. Spencer, and gracious to her husband's late pupils.

"Boys and young men like a little

judicious notice," she used to say, looking round with her pretty brown eyes, before, in the head master's drawing-room, she would advance on a shy youth with a photograph book. Now she began, "So you had quite a heroic adventure this afternoon, Mr. Spencer? I shall never forget it. I was quite at a distance when I heard the screams and saw that poor little girl dripping and insensible. It was frightful!"

"There was no harm done, happily," said Arthur. His face changed a little; but Mrs. Stafford continued:

"Ah, but if you had been a moment later! You were so prompt; and I am sure you ran a great risk of catching cold, if of no more. Coming from a hot climate too! I like presence of mind."

"Yes," said Arthur, accepting the compliments, and by no means showing presence of mind in changing the subject; but Mrs. Stafford continued, with her sweetest look:

"And my cousin here, too, was quite—



on the spot. Isn't that what you boys say? I saw you show great agility. I have no doubt you noticed it, Dulcie, too?"

"We were all very much frightened, and I am sure we don't want to talk about it," said Geoffrey, bluntly.

"Ah, no, it strikes a discordant note. But *what* an interesting looking man the poor father is. And I fancied that he reminded me of somebody I had known."

"Yes," said Arthur, catching at this side of the subject. "I dare say the same odd sort of likeness struck you, Mrs. Stafford. I was struck by Mr. Geoffrey Leighton's odd likeness in face and voice to Oakenshaw. Accidental resemblances are often curious."

"Well," said Florence, striking in to keep the talk away from the ice, "I don't believe much in accidental likenesses. When one sees many young people of the same family, they are always much more like each other than they can be like any one else. And even with cousins, how many likenesses one sees in the village here. Every

one, for instance, that comes of Barnes blood has those great black eyes."

"Yes," said Arthur; "but old Barnes's grandfather was a gipsy. I don't think it's very general. I am sure neither Jem nor Hugh are at all like me."

"Practical illustrations are so interesting," said Mrs. Stafford.

"And by way of a practical illustration," said Arthur—"as we are so practical and personal—here are two brothers," looking at Geoffrey and Alick, "and, as far as I can see, there is no likeness between them."

Both the young men coloured up as Arthur delivered this remark in a cheerful conversational tone; and Alick said:

"Geoffrey is like our sister, Mrs. Clifton."

"And who," asked Dr. Osgood, "may I ask, is the gentleman who has formed a text for this interesting discussion?"

"Dulcie, this is our dance," said Geoffrey, suddenly starting up, and almost dragging Dulcie away.

What might not come next? What

would Arthur say? What was Dr. Osgood thinking of? How would Mrs. Stafford strike in?

But Arthur himself was glad of a change, and with half-a-dozen words about Oakenshaw, said that he was afraid they were detaining Mrs. Stafford, and made a move to return to the ball-room.

"The very jolliest dance I ever saw!" said Charles Osgood, enthusiastically, as the last guests departed. "Oh, Mrs. Crichton, we are all most awfully obliged to you for giving it."

"My dear Charles, I like to entertain young people. I am very glad you have all been happy. I have," said Mrs. Crichton.

"No one seemed dull," said Violante, "But Arthur was so clever in managing it all—much cleverer than you, Signor Hugo."

"He always is," said her husband. "He has tired himself out."

"Oh, no; it has been a great success," said Arthur. "But if we are not tired, Aunt Lily must be; so let us all get off quickly."

“Who was the leading beauty, Arthur?” said his aunt. “Who was the belle of the ball?”

Arthur gave a smiling shake of the head, and then a little bow to Violante.

“That’s not for me to say,” he said.

“I do not think that any one is handsomer than Florence,” said Violante, with decision. “And—but it is too late to tell tales, so I will say good-night.”

Geoffrey had been silent during these remarks. But though his Dulcie had been beside him, as sweet and fair as heart could wish, he could not endorse the opinion that it had been a pleasant ball.



## CHAPTER XVII.

### A NEW RELATION.

“A little more than kin and less than kind.”

IN the constant and lively companionship of all his fellow-guests at the Bank House, Geoffrey could not outwardly dwell on the conviction that had possessed him; but it was never out of his mind. Often as he had cried “wolf” to himself, reality was different to fancy. This was the real ghost, not the nervous apprehension of it. He watched Alick, who looked downcast and tired, but he knew well enough that there was a far simpler reason for his want of spirits. None of the other young men were very early on the next morning; but Geoffrey got up and went out and paced up and down the streets of Oxley, debating with himself whether going to ask for Minnie Oakenshaw would be regarded as

an act of attention to his host, or as a suspicious circumstance. Suddenly, as he stood in the broad market-place in front of the Bank House, looking vaguely about him, and watching the passers-by going through the frosty fog to their morning's business, Mr. Oakenshaw, spruce and neat, came along the path on his way from the Local Board to the bank on some business. Both he and Geoffrey gave a violent start as they met, and in the reflection of his own consciousness in Oakenshaw's face, Geoffrey read the strongest confirmation of his identity.

"Good morning," he said, half mechanically. "How is the little girl?"

"I am afraid she caught cold, but Mrs. Jones does not think it of consequence," answered Oakenshaw; but there was a certain absence in his manner, as if he was not quite attending to what he said. "I have a little business at the bank," he continued, "but I suppose Mr. Crichton has not come in yet?"

"I don't know," said Geoffrey; "it's half-past ten."

Neither had really anything further to say, yet both seemed to have an odd desire to prolong the interview.

"Very handsome town," said Mr. Oakenshaw. "Do you know it well?"

"Yes. I was at school here."

"Ah! I think you said your father lived near London?"

"Yes," said Geoffrey; "but I think—I don't know—— Now we have made so many friends here, perhaps he'll come down and pay the place a visit."

Again Geoffrey averted his eyes from the experiment which he could not help trying. Perhaps it was the frosty air which gave his companion a sudden catch in the breath, just as Mr. Crichton's dog-cart drove up to the door.

"Good morning," he said to Geoffrey, as he got out. "I didn't expect to find any one stirring. If Arthur is awake, the ladies want me to make some arrangements with

him. Ah! Mr. Oakenshaw, how is your little girl? I was to find that out also."

"A little cold—nothing, I hope, to signify. I have a message from the Board, sir, when you are at leisure."

"Very well. If you'll be so kind as to step into the bank, I'll come, when I have spoken to my cousin."

Mr. Crichton's tone, though perfectly courteous, was naturally that of a superior, making arrangements at his own pleasure; and, as Mr. Oakenshaw bowed and withdrew in silence, Geoffrey experienced a curious and perfectly unreasonable sense of annoyance, at hearing him so addressed.

Perturbed and fretted, he followed Mr. Crichton into the Bank House dining-room, where Arthur and one or two of the other young men were beginning breakfast.

"Hallo, Hugh, what praiseworthy activity! But you took it easier last night than we did. How are Aunt Lily and Violante?"

"Too much pleased with their success to be tired. At least, I haven't seen my



mother ; but I was to tell you that the water at the bottom of the garden will bear to-day. We thought no one would care about going to the field to-day, and we shall have lunch and tea going ; so people can skate as much or as little as they have energy for. Violante will let the young ladies at the Manor know," he added, with a good-humoured smile at Geoffrey.

"No—will she?" said Arthur. "On the contrary, every one at Redhurst will be too busy to go, so some one from here *must* take the message."

Geoffrey could not but laugh at the good-natured tone of kindly mischief, but he coloured up, while Alick, whose brow had cleared considerably at the arrangement, said that Geoffrey had succeeded already in persuading Fordham that his sister would like to see him that morning.

"Ah, then," said Arthur, "that settles itself easily, and we can all find our way to Redhurst as we like. Have some coffee, Hugh—never mind the bank."

"I suppose that is the Indian plan of doing business," said Hugh, sitting down nevertheless, and asking Arthur if iced water had agreed with him ; while the rest of the party gathered in, and there was a great deal of talking and laughing and of mutual congratulation between the cousins on the success of the ball, and some discussion of it ; while Alick, who knew perfectly well already that Mr. Spencer and Miss Macdonald had found each other's dancing suit remarkably well, felt his heart sinking lower and lower every minute, as he candidly admired his host's good looks and pleasant ways, and weighed in the balance his independence and good position against his own youth and means represented by a minus quantity. Alick did not mentally call Arthur names, he only said to himself that he had never seen such a nice fellow, and said it with a very heavy heart. Geofrey, meanwhile, was fuming with a sense that Mr. Oakenshaw was all this while waiting in the bank, longing to get rid of

the weight of his near presence, yet with that strange sense of anger at his being disregarded and kept waiting.

Hugh remembered him, however, in course of time, and departed, and as Geoffrey walked fast along the road to the Manor with James Fordham, a reaction set in again, and he began to think what a fool he was for his fancies, and to make himself vigorously agreeable to Florence, when they arrived at the Manor, admiring its domestic architecture with that "knowledgeable" air which sometimes sounded a little conceited, but was too hearty and enthusiastic to give offence. Miss Venning was no doubt gratified at hearing that the round-arched windows and heavy cornices were in excellent taste, though she laughed and assured him that Mr. James Crichton had taught them long ago to admire their house.

Geoffrey talked cleverly and ardently all the way to Redhurst. He skated, and tried, as he said to himself, to feel that he

was like all these commonplace happy people, in whose lives were no elements of misery and disgrace. Arthur came to the pond for a minute or two, but did not join in the skating, and Alick got Annie to himself and went in to lunch with her in better spirits than he had enjoyed the day before. It was much colder, and the air was dull and foggy. Florence and Dulcie went home early to rest before the evening. Geoffrey escorted them over the fields, and then set off for a walk by himself to try to think over all that had passed. He walked slowly along towards Oxley. The rustic hedges and the little suburban streets looked unspeakably dreary in the dismal hazy twilight; but Geoffrey, never very open to external influences, was quite unconscious of their effect. The gloom was in his own soul, and now he pulled himself up with a great effort and forced himself to consider of what he was afraid; trying to use his intellect to test and check his unreasonable misery. But he found it quite

impossible to argue away his conviction that Frederick Oakenshaw and Frank Osgood were one and the same person, that the poor clerk whom Arthur Spencer patronised was his own "near relation," who had once been guilty of a gross fraud, and had fled the country in consequence of it, that, so far as Geoffrey knew, he was liable to a heavy punishment by the law of the land, that the likeness was no fancy of his own, but might at any time be observed by some one better informed than Arthur Spencer; when the discovery of this unhappy kinsman would cover every Osgood and Leighton with perplexity, confusion, and shame, while the thought of what it might prove to himself made Geoffrey's very senses reel. No need, however, to drive it so near home. It was bad enough for James Leighton's son; he need not think what it would be for Frank Osgood's. As for that "near relation" himself, no thought but of wrath and bitterness touched Geoffrey's mind. It never even occurred to him

to pity him or to feel for him anything but a shrinking horror. From the day, when as a little boy he had left that mysterious name out of his prayers, Geoffrey had never forgiven Frank Osgood for costing him so much suffering.

The story that Arthur had told him of the wife's death, the child's illness and recovery, and of the satisfaction of the poor fellow who had been tossed for so long about the world in finding a little haven of comfort, went for nothing. The fear of discovery of the family shame, of the revival of past troubles, was obvious and most reasonable. Geoffrey was right-minded enough to have faced this fear; the dread that overwhelmed his conscience was the dread that in some way *he* might be recognised as Frank Osgood's son—it was the horror of being brought into a possible personal relation to him.

It had not yet occurred to him that he could or should have done anything to prevent a discovery, or that any course of

action was open to him; he had but just got beyond persuading himself that there was no real cause for fear when, as suddenly as in the morning, as he came to a turn of the road, he found himself face to face with the object of his fears. He started violently, and so did the other.

"Excuse me," said Oakenshaw, as Geoffrey stopped short, "I am in a hurry to get home."

Geoffrey put up his hand as if to stop his path.

"I know who you are," he said, without a moment's warning or premeditation. "You are Frank Osgood. How can you dare to come back to England?"

"Sir!" exclaimed Oakenshaw, "I—I don't understand you."

"Yes you do," returned Geoffrey. "I know you by your face and your voice, and others, older than I, will know you better."

It was a sudden and impetuous challenge, and it was met by an equally sudden and impetuous answer.

"If you do, you know also that the best friend Frank Osgood ever had in this world was your father."

The truth was told, and in that moment of deadly certainty it seemed to Geoffrey that all his former fears of this man's identity were light as air. He and his "near relation," stood face to face.

"My best friend," said Frank Osgood, "your father's son will never betray me."

"Why not? what do you mean?" cried Geoffrey, grasping at the hedge by his side.

"If you have a trace of James Leighton's goodness of heart, or family feeling, you will help me to conceal the past that cannot be undone, and leave me in peace to repent of it."

"I have too much family feeling to allow you to remain, where a discovery is so probable."

Frank Osgood was the threatened person, and was in a position of difficulty and danger; but he was an older man, and



had been in as bad a case before ; and moreover, merely regarded Geoffrey as his cousin's son. He was therefore the most in command of his senses.

"I don't think," he said, "that at your age you can be quite well enough informed in the family history to call me to account. It is certainly to your interest to leave me alone, and I shall take care not to come across you. If you choose to tell your father that we have met, you can tell him also that I can earn my living independently of him."

The familiar voice and manner, now that Frank Osgood spoke in his own person, for a moment silenced Geoffrey with an odd instinct of obedience. Next moment he resumed resolutely :

"You have no right to take such a tone, and to make conditions with me. You are in my power ; and I say that if you rely on my silence, you are bound to leave a place where you are so likely to be recognised for your own sake, and for—ours."

"I have friends here."

"Yes, under a false name and by false pretences. I don't want to be harsh. I have always expected that you would come back and disgrace me. But if you'll hide yourself, go away entirely, I shall say nothing. I'll give you the means to do so."

Geoffrey jerked out these sentences one after another. He really was trying to control the exceeding anger and disgust which he felt; but the words awakened an unexpected response.

"No, I had better trust older friends. Your father and mother, sir, will advise me better than you."

"Never! never!" cried Geoffrey, in a sudden agony that swept away all his self-control. "If you will not swear never to reveal yourself to them—if you will not leave this place at once—if you let any one guess at your identity, I will speak; I will tell Mr. Crichton this night, your employers; I will give you up to justice."

I swear that I will." The vehemence and the force of the younger, more resolute nature, conquered. Frank Osgood's fence had been good; but now he lost his guard, his thoughts were scattered; a deadly fear seized on him. The threat of betrayal was perhaps equally terrible to each, and the stronger will got the upper hand.

"Won't you have pity on my child?" he said. *She* is well here, and happy."

"I don't wish to injure her. Take her away; go abroad again at once, before you are seen further. I'll not let you starve here!"

"No, I am in no need at present," said Osgood, stopping Geoffrey's hand. "You drive me away then?"

"I will betray you, if you betray yourself! Promise!"

"I promise! But, Geoffrey Leighton, when I remember your father and your mother, I wonder how it is that their son can be so hard."

He turned off and walked away fast as he spoke, and Geoffrey stood still. His limbs trembled, he hid his face in his hands as it came full upon him that this dreadful scene of mutual threat and fear had passed—possibly—with his own father. Had he threatened his *father*, and offered to pay him hush-money, and driven him from his only shelter?

This seemed like a new horror to Geoffrey thought in truth it had been the fear of the discovery of his own connection with the story that had made a revelation so horrible to him. Had it been merely the fear of discovery of the long-past *crime*, his own sense would have told him that Mr. Leighton would be the right person to deal with it. But the fulfilment of the spectral fear of a life-time had come suddenly upon him, and he had fled from it with unreasoning terror. He did not now see exactly for what he had to blame himself, and yet he was already filled with self-reproach. This man was a felon, and his discovery

would be nothing but misery to himself and his relations, near or far. It had been the height of rash folly for him to venture where recognition was possible. Nobody could suppose that after nearly four-and-twenty years it was anybody's duty to give him up to justice ; no one else had been suspected in his stead ; his conviction could do nobody any good. Geoffrey had been quite justified in getting him out of the way. And he was prepared to pay for security, even, he felt, at the expense of his immediate marriage. Nobody could say that he had been harsh in urging concealment ; and he did not care what happened to Frank Osgood so long as he remained concealed. He felt as if he himself were the criminal, as he hurried back to the Bank House through the fog ; as if some hitherto unknown breath of shame had passed over him, separating him from his companions. The ball was at the Town Hall, on the other side of the Market Place. Geoffrey felt as if the young men's talk

over their dinner rang in his ears like tin kettles. He fancied they were all watching him, that Alick, who of course knew his ways, would see that he was unlike himself.

They went in good time to the hall, of which Arthur was one of the stewards, to be ready to receive Mrs. Crichton and her party, to which Florence and Dulcie belonged—Dulcie was so anxious that Geoffrey should think her white dress as pretty as the pink of the day before. Geoffrey could hardly make up his mind to come up to her, but he followed Arthur, who, after supplying the two girls with cards, was proceeding to write his name on them.

“Have you heard anything of Minnie Oakenshaw?” he said to Flossy.

“Yes, I am afraid she has really a bad, feverish cold, which is not to be wondered at.”

“No, it was an awful chill. But I hope she isn’t very ill; she almost died, you

know, in India—and that poor fellow does worship her?”

“Mrs. Jones will make her keep quiet,” said Florence; “but I think she is delicate.”

“Dulcie!” said Alick’s voice close by, “that is a get-up! Come and give me this waltz, for I see Geoff is in a brown study.”

Dulcie laughed and put her hand in Alick’s arm, but Geoffrey did not heed her, nor look round. This was an echo and enforcement of Frank Osgood’s one appeal to his mercy.



## CHAPTER XVIII.

FRANK OSGOOD.

"Be it ever so humble there's no place like home."

FRANK OSGOOD was a man who all his life had been subject to sudden impulses, bad and good, which had often overthrown plans of conduct previously long considered.

He had been an idle and ill-conducted young man, wanting both in principle and self-control, but with a certain warmth of manner and perhaps of heart, which was engaging, and won forgiveness for the many debts incurred through gambling and betting, the chief vices in which he indulged. In the matter of his marriage the wilful girl who was entirely fascinated by him had been perhaps as much to blame as he; nor was he the only one to blame for the theft that had been his final ruin.



A great pressure of "debts of honour," and a promise of immediate assistance to restore what he had taken, had perhaps for the moment blinded him to the gulf which he passed when he first performed a criminal action, and as he did not personally retain a farthing of the five hundred pounds left in his charge—but was forced to pay it all away to his friends—when the fear of discovery forced him to fly, he was amply convinced of his folly if not of his guilt.

He had intended to let his wife know where he was, so soon as it was possible to do so; but he had been seen and recognised by a former acquaintance, on the Continent, who informed him of her death, with enough of the circumstances to make him conclude that her child had perished with her; if not, he felt that it would be somehow cared for by his cousins. He went to Australia, and kept himself alive by all the various shifts to which such as he are reduced in a colony :

but whether from the absence of temptation or the remembrance of the ruin that had followed his one act of dishonesty, he never committed such another, but began by degrees to obtain a sort of character and reputation among his immediate neighbours. If he did not repent of his crime, he nearly forgot it, and Frederick Oakeshaw hardly realized that he was the same man as Frank Osgood. At length, after many years, he fell in with a girl, good, pretty, and attractive. She was quite up to the mark of the kind of society into which he had fallen, and had respectable connections in the colony. He married, and by her friends obtained the recommendation to the Calcutta house, from which the Bank had taken him. He loved her better than he had ever loved any one else, and made her a good husband; but in the Indian climate her health failed, and one child after another fell a sacrifice.

These repeated misfortunes attracted the

notice of Arthur Spencer, who gave some substantial help and much kindness. He soon perceived that he had to do with a man originally of his own class, and when the poor clerk was thrown into utter despair by the death of his wife, shewed him not only the sympathy of one who had been in some degree a fellow sufferer, but shewed it as an equal friend. His proposal that the Oakenshaws should accompany him to England, could not but be tempting; the father would have run any risk to save Minnie's life; he had no reason to think that his family were connected with the neighbourhood of Oxley, as the Osgoods had not purchased Willingham when he left England; he thought himself altered beyond recognition, and in the humble sphere in which he moved, he never expected to meet either friend or relation of former years. Nor probably would he have done so, but for the incident of the skating.

His feelings about the past were peculiar.

The thing had happened so long ago, and he had suffered so much since, and, as it were, so respectably, that he could not realise himself as belonging to the "criminal classes"—he could talk and even think of others who had so sinned, hardly realising that he was as they were. The sorrowing husband and father seemed to have so little in common with the ruined gambler who had made away with his employer's money; while the fact of his second wife's ignorance of the past kept it farther away from him. But when Arthur came upon the scene, an uneasy sense revived of unfitness for his society, and it was from this cause as well as from caution that he had so emphatically marked out the distance between them.

Now, as he came face to face with his young kinsman, as he felt the cruel pang of being scorned and put to shame by one of the younger generation, the past came back to vigorous life. He felt that his sin had indeed found him out, and that

he could never be as if it had not been committed. Why had he not attempted to throw dust in young Leighton's eyes? How weak and impulsive had been the avowal of his identity! Half-an-hour ago it had not seemed impossible that James Leighton might be glad to hear of him in peace and comfort, and might even have come and shaken him by the hand in memory of their youth. *Now*, he realised that his re-appearance could never be welcome, and could cause nothing but shame and misery to his kinsfolk, and that he himself in England might be in actual danger of the law. What could he do? There had been something in the intensity of Geoffrey's determination which had impressed him as irrevocable and incontestable. He did not doubt that the threat of betrayal would be fulfilled, if he were again seen in Oxley. Geoffrey had conquered him and he was afraid to defy him. In the face of these unexpected reproaches, he could not even feel secure of Arthur

Spencer's conduct in the event of a discovery.

But what could he do? Already he had become so well accustomed to the simple common-place externals of his life, that they had all the force of habit. He walked on through the raw cold fog till he reached the neat little gate of Laurel Villa, opened the door with his latch-key and turned into the little parlour. Tea was ready on the table, the smart curtains were drawn across the window, a bright fire was burning, the hearth was well swept, and the gas ready lighted, while Minnie, rolled up in a warm shawl, was looking at a picture-book in the arm-chair.

She clapped her hands at the sight of her father.

"Oh, there you are, daddy, it's very late. I've come down to have tea because you shouldn't have to pour it out for yourself."

"Indeed, and she had much better have

stayed in bed ; for she's very feverish with her cold, and so hoarse as you may hear, sir," said Mrs. Jones, appearing on the scene, and looking reproachfully at Minnie ; " but when little girls won't do as they're told——"

"Then old ladies must do as they're told," said Minnie, hugging her and laughing.

" Oh, my ! that's not the way for a little girl to speak. My young ladies would never think of such a thing——"

" Now ! now !" cried Minnie, holding up her finger ; " didn't you tell me how Miss Frederica went out in the road without leave and was nearly run over. You know she did ! And Master Arthur terrified your life out. You said so ! Daddy, Mr. Spencer used to terrify Mrs. Jones' life out !"

Mrs. Jones was a most kind-hearted woman. All her young days had been spent in Mrs. Crichton's service ; and, being well inclined towards Arthur's *protégés*, she had bestowed on Minnie some much-needed care and training. She

had no children of her own, and had taken kindly to the lonely little girl, and attended to her clothes and her bread and butter, in a way that the small sum paid her for making and mending would never have demanded of her.

“My dear,” she said, “Mr. Arthur was always a young gentleman. And now go and pour out a cup of tea for your papa, and then you must go to bed again.”

Minnie, superintended by Mrs. Jones, proceeded with subdued enthusiasm to deal with the teapot; while her father started as if rousing himself from a dream, and looked round the little parlour. It was not the sort of room to which he had been accustomed in his youth; but now, how content he would have been to feel sure, for the remainder of his days, of his seat by that fireside, his cup of tea at that neat little table, and his place under the Local Board. All this was enough for Minnie—must he deprive her even of *this*? Never.



"She ought not to go out at night, I suppose?" he said.

"Out at night, sir! Why, it might be the child's death with that cough! Where *was* you thinking of taking her?"

"Oh, nowhere—nowhere, Mrs. Jones. She had better go to bed."

He sat forlornly stirring his tea, with his sad eyes fixed on Minnie. If she was ill he *could* not take her away from a warm shelter and a kind friend. Yet, if he were discovered and his history known, perhaps all these kind friends would turn away from her.

All his previous ideas were so confused and confounded that, as had been said, he could not feel sure of how Arthur Spencer might act towards him, or perhaps even his promise to Geoffrey might not have prevented him from throwing himself on his mercy. What could he do? Minnie was naughty, and made a great fuss about going to bed, only giving him the back of her hair to kiss, and resisting Mrs. Jones.

She must never know the truth: suppose she ceased to love her father!

There was no use in having any communication with Mr. Spencer, and even as he thought so, he pulled a sheet of paper over to him, and wrote on it a few hasty lines.

"If I *did* send him this it would reveal nothing," he said to himself, and he put up the note and stamped it and directed it.

Then with the idea of making pursuit less likely, he wrote another for the Local Board; then sat balancing plans in his mind. He concocted a long, elaborate scheme for telling Mrs. Jones that he was going away on business for the Local Board—and the Local Board that he was summoned to a dying relation—of telling Minnie that he was going to London and would bring her a present. Then he might present elsewhere some of his Calcutta testimonials—if he could get to America? He was almost interested by making out the scheme, it seemed to have no reality,

till he woke up to the sense that it was no exercise of fancy, but something to be done. It seemed ingenious; and all of a sudden he felt he had not the courage to carry a bit of it out. He would go and walk about for a bit—he might let himself in again—if *he liked*. But if he did not like! He took a bag and filled it with one or two necessities—he might as well have it in his hand; but as he certainly would come back, he need not say good-bye to Minnie. Perhaps he was better out of the way till Geoffrey Leighton had left Oxley.

And *saying* all these things to himself. yet knowing in the bottom of his heart that he *had* resolved to go, he felt for his latch-key in his pocket, took his bag in his hand, and went out into the foggy night, shutting the door of Laurel Villa behind him.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### MISSING.

"My old sorrow wakes and cries."

ON the morning after the Oxley ball, the party at Bank House broke up. Geoffrey Leighton was going to London, Jem Fordham and Charles Osgood were to return home, and Alick had to return to his duties at Fordham. They were lingering over a rather late breakfast, and the two Leighton's, Alick warmly, and Geoffrey with due politeness, were begging Arthur to come to Sloane House, when he was staying in London with the James Crichtons; when the morning letters were put into Arthur's hand.

His sudden start, as he opened one attracted Geoffrey's attention at once. He read it through twice, and then said hurriedly:

"I believe I must ask you to excuse me

and say good-bye now. This is about a little matter of business about which I must see my cousin at once. Good-bye ——” to Geoffrey. “I don’t think I once thanked you for helping me when I was half frozen. I shall look you up when I come to London. Good-bye.”

Geoffrey’s eyes were on the letter in Arthur’s hand. What if Frank Osgood had broken his word and made a clean breast of it to the only person whom he could regard as a friend. He could ask for no explanation, and had to go back to London to his promising prospects, and to immediate expectation of a long visit from Dulcie to Sloane House, with this thorn in his side to spoil it all; while Alick went back to add up the Fordham parish club books with a half belief that the mysterious missive must have come from Bridge Hurst, and be connected in some way with that extra waltz of Arthur’s with Annie Macdonald which he had watched so enviously the night before.

Arthur after a moment's reflection did not seek Hugh immediately, but went off to the office of the Local Board, and asked if Mr. Oakenshaw had come to his work that morning.

"No, sir," said the head-clerk; "and we are very glad you have happened to step round, as we have just received Mr. Oakenshaw's resignation by this morning's post. Here it is, sir."

"Anything gone wrong?" asked Arthur.

"Nothing whatever, sir. Mr. Oakenshaw was very punctual and attentive, and understood his business thoroughly. Nor could it have been premeditated; for I chanced to hear him remark to the boy as he went out, that he hoped he would mind to sprinkle some ashes this morning on the door-step, the frost made it so uncommonly slippery.

"I'll go and see him," said Arthur, unwilling to be questioned in the first excitement of the mystery.

He hurried away to Laurel Villa, and

was met at the gate by Mrs. Jones, with her bonnet on.

“Oh, Mr. Arthur ! I was just coming up to the Bank in hopes of finding you. Might you know anything, sir, of Mr. Oakenshaw ?”

“No—where is he ?”

“Mr. Arthur, sir, he went out last night with never a word to anyone. A thing he never did before ; for after Minnie went to bed, he'd smoke his pipe and read a book as quiet as could be. But he have went out and never come in. And there was I sat up till past twelve, and never slept a wink when I did lie down, expecting to see him brought home a corpse. Come in, sir.”

Arthur followed her into the little parlour ; but at the first sound of his footstep, Minnie flew out of the back-regions, half dressed, and all her hair flying.

“Where's my daddy ?” she cried. “Mr. Spencer, find my daddy ! Why doesn't he come in ?”

"Now there, miss!" cried Mrs. Jones, "running out into this cold fog away from the kitchen fire. Go back this minute, and I'll tell you when your papa comes in."

"Yes, go in, there's a good little girl," said Arthur, coaxingly. "Go in and don't be frightened—Daddy will be angry if you catch cold."

Mrs. Jones' small maid, appearing at this minute, captured Minnie in spite of a struggle and a violent "No! No!"

"I had a line from her father," said Arthur, "but it explains nothing. Was he ill, Mrs. Jones? Was anything the matter?"

"Well, sir, he wasn't a gentleman to be what you'd call *well*—for a gentleman he was, sir, as no doubt you know," said Mrs. Jones, with a sharp look at Arthur.

"Did you think so?" said Arthur cautiously. "But yesterday?"

"Well, sir, there was nothing the matter with him but a touch of rheumatism, as he has frequent; but one remark he made does strike my memory. He said, 'Mrs.



Jones,' he said, 'would it hurt Minnie to take her out at night?' Now, of course, with that child's cold, to take her out might be her death, and I told him so. But something must have been in his mind, sir, then."

"Did he have any letter, yesterday?"

"Why, sir, I don't think he's had a letter, except it may be a line from you, and a note once from Mrs. Hugh, to ask the child to drink tea, since here he's been."

"Well, Mrs. Jones, I must go and speak to Mr. Crichton. I know nothing to account for this, and I can't help supposing that we shall have a note from him. Unless some accident——"

"It's borne in on my mind, Mr. Arthur, that he meant to go," said Mrs. Jones. "Otherwise, of course, the night was foggy, and if he strolled by the river— But then, why should a rheumatic gentleman that liked his fireside go and stroll by the river in a frosty fog?"

"No, certainly," said Arthur, with a half laugh. "Take care of Minnie, Mrs. Jones, and you shall hear from me."

Arthur hurried back to the Bank, and found his cousin in the library, which room he still used for more private business.

"Well, Arthur, got rid of your company?" he said, without looking up.

"Yes, but I want to speak to you ;" and in a few words Arthur told of the matter in hand, and then put the hurried scrawl received that morning before his cousin. It ran thus :—

"You are the only friend I have, the best one I ever had in the world. Don't think I have repaid *your* goodness by ingratitude, though I can never show you the contrary.—F. O."

"Then," said Hugh, as he read it, "this flight was intentional. There can be no idea of an accident. And he can't have come to any harm, unless—by his own desire."

"No, no! that can't be," said Arthur,

hurriedly. "There was nothing in the least eccentric about him. He never did queer thing all the time I knew him."

"He ought to have taken the child with him," said Hugh. "It's a cool thing to leave her on the hands of strangers in this way."

"But I'm sure he had no thought of such a thing the day of the accident. There was nothing wrong then. I ought to have gone to ask after Minnie; but I was tired, and shirked it."

"I think," said Hugh, slowly, "that he must have come face to face with some old scrape or trouble."

"But how?"

"That of course we can't say, as we know nothing about him."

"But what shall I do if he doesn't turn up directly? Put it in the hands of the police—advertise?"

"I don't know," said Hugh. "You see he knows quite well where we all are, and where the child is. If he means to dis-

appear, he won't answer an advertisement, and as for the police—you see you don't know what you might let him in for."

"But," said Arthur, "he couldn't make away with himself, without leaving traces, except—and the river is frozen hard."

"Oh yes," said Hugh, with decision. "That's very unlikely. Don't let that haunt you."

Arthur was silent for a moment, and then said rather wistfully:

"You think very badly of the poor fellow?"

"My dear boy, what reason have you ever given me to think well of him?"

"No, I know. But Hugh, if you had seen him in all his troubles! They lost two babies—and then the poor little wife. And there was this poor fellow with never a penny in his pocket nor a friend in the world! When I thought of all the love and sympathy that was given *me* for my sorrow. I thought there never was such another, but these commoner sorrows,

these common cares, they're worse though people think less of them. But what shall I do now? I can't sit still and do nothing."

Hugh was much more concerned with the effect of all these incidents on Arthur, than with the fate of Mr. Oakenshaw; but he knew it was no time to follow up his last remark, so he answered:

"I think you might ask a few questions of the child, or see if anything has been left behind him that might give a clue. Since he has left her on our hands we are justified in taking any measures we choose. If you like, I will come with you to Laurel Villa?"

Arthur caught at this offer, and they were soon in Mrs. Jones' parlour, where Florence Venning, with Minnie clinging to her skirts, rose up to meet them.

"I came to ask for Minnie," she said; "and Mrs. Jones has told me what has happened."

Minnie dashed away Florence's hand and ran to Arthur.

"Where's my daddy? Have you got daddy? Why doesn't he come?" she cried, seizing Arthur's hand, and beating against his knees, with a violence of angry grief which he hardly knew how to deal with, as he took her up in his arms and tried to comfort her.

"This is a bad business," said Hugh, in a rapid undertone to Florence. "The fellow has evidently made off as soon as he had got the child into safe hands. I wish Arthur had never saddled himself with them."

"You don't think—Mrs. Jones was saying he might be drowned," said Florence, in a whisper.

"No, no; don't suggest *that*," said Hugh, with a rapid glance at Arthur; "I'm afraid it's much more commonplace."

"Now, Minnie," Arthur said, "if you will leave off crying and answer Mr. Crichton's questions, perhaps you may help us to find your father."

Minnie turned round on Arthur's knee,

pushed back her bush of hair, and faced Hugh, who said very kindly :

“My dear, can you tell me if you have any friends or relations here in England?”

“No,” said Minnie.

“Have you any aunts or uncles?”

“Grandmama in Sydney is dead, and there’s no one to write letters to now,” she said.

“Did your father never talk to you of going away from Oxley?”

“Oh ! no, he *never* meant to go away. He’d said we’d live here for ever and ever, and that it was a paradise of rest.”

Hugh paused, touched in spite of himself, and Arthur put his hand on her neck ; but her face, which had all along looked doubtful, grew more suspicious. She slipped off Arthur’s knee, and standing up by herself, said loudly and abruptly :

“My father is the best man that ever lived in the world !”

What dim memories of her own, what half understood words of Mrs. Jones, or

what look in their faces, she thus defied, they could not tell ; but they had no heart to question her further, and Hugh's eye was caught by a book which, with one or two borrowed from the Oxley library, lay on a side table.

It was an early copy of Tennyson's Poems, bound in red morocco, and finished round the edge with a delicate stamped pattern in gilding. Inside was written " L. B. to F. O.," and a crest had evidently been taken out.

"This came from a gentleman's library," said Hugh, and Arthur nodded.

They discovered nothing else dating back further than Arthur's acquaintance with the Oakenshaws, and nothing whatever to furnish any clue

Minnie stood leaning against the table, eyeing them as if she blamed them all for her misery ; and they could only leave her to kind Mrs. Jones, who could give her no better comfort than a nice dinner, which the poor little thing was far too wretched to eat.



Florence promised to come and see her again in the evening, and Arthur and Hugh went back together to Redhurst, after setting on foot such inquiries as could be made without any great publicity.

This took some time, and they came into the drawing-room to find the two Mrs. Crichtons comfortably at tea, with the children tumbling about on the rug. When his own Lily climbed on his knee and kissed him, Hugh could not say a harsh word of the father of the poor child whose grief he had just witnessed, and he told the story without any suggestions as to Oakenshaw's motives.

Neither of the ladies were, however, inclined to have much pity for the runaway, the elder Mrs. Crichton remarking that she never had any opinion of people without antecedents; while Violante exclaimed that no one could be good for anything who could desert a poor little girl like that.

"Mrs. Jones will be very kind to her for the present, and Flossy is going to look in on her," said Arthur.

"Did you see Flossy?" asked Violante.

"Yes; she was there when we came."

"She is very good. *Mama mia*, do you know I forgot to tell you something that I noticed at our ball. Mr. Blandford could hardly take his eyes off Flossy. He watched every one that asked her to dance."

"Does Mr. Blandford admire Flossy?" asked Arthur.

"Why, yes," said Violante, emphatically; "he has admired her for years. I wish she would say yes, for he is so good and so clever. People think he will be a bishop one day."

"I can't help thinking," said Mrs. Crichton, "that I see signs of yielding. I saw them together at supper here, and Flossy is looking particularly handsome, and has lost that girlish bluntness and *brusquerie*."

"Yes; she would make a first-rate wife for a church dignitary," said Hugh; "but why has she been so long making up her mind?"

"Oh!" said Violante, after a pause, "that

is one of those questions which nobody can answer."

"Which somebody won't answer, I think," said Hugh smiling.

"And after all," pursued his wife, "Why should she? What would everyone do without her? And I think no one is good enough for—no, not Mr. Blandford. That is what I think in my heart."

"You won't be a match-maker, Violante," said Arthur, as he set down his cup.

"No," said Violante, "I shall not make *that* match—not just yet."

She rose up as she spoke, with little Hughie in her arms, and made him kiss good night as she took him to bed, and looking into Arthur's troubled face, she said softly with her hand on his shoulder, "Signor Arthur, you mustn't be unhappy. Perhaps Mr. Oakenshaw will write to you and give you a good reason for going away. You know better about him than we do."

The other children had coaxed their grandmother away for some purpose of their

own, and Arthur, left alone with his cousin, exclaimed.

“As sweet and kind as ever! Ah! Hugh, *your* romance has ended in a most happy realify.”

“So happy,” said Hugh, “that it has but one counterpoise. If you—”

For years, the thought of the sorrow and loneliness which his unhappy action had helped to bring on his cousin, had been to Hugh a real, and abiding grief. And now he checked at once the expression of self-reproach, which could only distress Arthur, and said gently :

“That accident on Tuesday tried you very much.”

“Yes, it did,” said Arthur, simply, “I can’t quite get over it. It haunts me, and I can’t sleep. Never mind about it, I shall soon be better. It does happen sometimes.”

“Even in India?”

“Once or twice. But I have enjoyed myself lately so much, home is so delightful.

I feel more what I lost. If she had lived !” He paused and then said, “It is impossible to begin again.”

“Will that be always so ?”

“I don’t know. I did not mean that it should,” said Arthur, rather to his cousin’s surprise. “But don’t mistake me,” he added, earnestly. “I’m almost always happy and comfortable. I enjoy everything, from a tiger hunt to a tea-party. Only coming home makes me feel that there are better sorts of happiness.”

“Can nothing make it easier to you ?”

“Why, I shall be better for telling you about it,” said Arthur ; “especially now I have something else to think about than my own fancies. I can’t help hoping we shall hear from Oakenshaw yet.”

He recurred to the discussion of this uppermost subject of interest, and Hugh had the tact to follow his lead. But well as he understood Arthur, and deeply as he felt for him, he had not got the clue to his present state of mind.

Arthur was a person whose life had run counter to his character. The severe nervous shock which he had once sustained had forced what he called "fidgets and fancies" on a sunny, happy-go-lucky nature, which took everything for granted, and was only too ready to swim with the stream. But even experience never taught him to anticipate these nervous sensations, and when they came he endured them as something apart from himself, and with the simplicity peculiar to him, welcomed any sympathy and support in dealing with them. For the rest, during the years of his absence he had really in a great measure outlived his early grief, and as he grew older had felt that marriage was both possible and desirable for him. Certain recollections of Florence Venning during his last weeks in England, had given him a half-formed wish to see his old friend again, as his fancy had never been caught by any new acquaintance. He came, and the sight of Hugh's home happiness, the renewed experience of

home affections, made him long far more to claim them for himself ; while, on the other hand, the familiar scenes renewed feelings which it was very difficult to put on one side. That one sweet romance of early youth came back upon him as a remembrance of Paradise ; but he had not the sort of nature which can live on a memory ; and while these contending feelings were making him a little shy of Flossy, the accident on the ice threw him back on himself, and in the painful, miserable recollections which it excited, made him feel as if he was altogether unfit for the new happiness which had begun to attract him. He could not put the past aside, it was all of no use. And then it was suddenly revealed to him that the choice did not altogether rest with himself, that Florence probably had other hopes, and that he could not win her if he tried. Then Arthur found that the present could cost him some sharp pangs, that the idea of Flossy in the lofty sphere to which Mr. Blandford might raise

her was exceedingly unwelcome to him. There was a sharp contention and struggle within him, which told on his looks and spirits; but even Hugh, during the days that followed, did not guess at its nature. Nothing was heard of the lost Oakenshaw, and his disappearance excited great interest in Oxley. In a short time Arthur, feeling the need of a change of scene, and unwilling to let the matter of Oakenshaw rest as it was, went up to London to stay with his cousin James Crichton, and with the view of consulting Mr. Leighton privately about the lost clerk.





## CHAPTER XX.

### ANNIE'S CHOICE.

“Sad before her leaned the boy,  
Goldilocks that I love well.”

THE same set of events, chronicled from different points of view, would often assume a very different character and a very different degree of relative importance. For many of the young people who had danced and skated through these two days of unusual gaiety—the days had been filled by dancing and skating; for Geoffrey Leighton the one thing of importance had been the fulfilment of his life-long dread; while for Alick, the balls and the skating, the alarm and the accident, had all meant so many hours passed in Annie Macdonald's presence; and the poor clerk and his little daughter were altogether extraneous to the main interest of the scene, The point that stayed in his memory. the important incident never to be forgotten, was not the cracking

ice or the hurry and alarm that succeeded it, but just the walk back afterwards to Redhurst, when he succeeded in getting Annie to himself alone. The frosty road, the hard, pale blue sky, flushing into red in the west, were for him only as a setting to her slim, brisk figure and *piquante* face; the sharp, clear air made her voice ring sweeter. She had taken off her own skates before he could be at hand to help her. This seemed a little slight; and he could not know that in poor Annie's opinion the boots and skates required a little private management, for they had both seen service.

Annie had been rather surprised at being invited to Redhurst for this week of gaiety, for Mrs. Crichton was not particularly intimate with her aunt. In February she was going to pay a long visit to her rich relations in the North, and secretly she felt that she would wait for the end of that visit before deciding on her final step. In which direction Alick's wistful eyes and half-suppressed eagerness would pull her, she hardly knew;

but perhaps the walk with him *was* a temptation, for she let him quicken his pace and walk a little ahead of the rest of the party. They talked, of course, about the accident, and a little about the Oakenshaws, Annie telling how she had heard Mr. Spencer laughed at at Redhurst for his patronage of his old clerk. "I suppose he is a very good-natured fellow," said Alick, with an effort.

"Yes; he seems to undertake all the troublesome arrangements for the ball, and to run every one's errands."

A silence, during which Alick's eyes explored the hedges dreamily.

"There are no honeysuckles in flower now," he said presently, in a sort of tentative fashion.

"I should think not! In January? In what sort of country do you expect to find them?" said Annie, laughing.

"In a country where I spend a good deal of my time. You may call it 'dream-land' or 'fools' paradise.' I'm taking a stroll in it this afternoon, and it's

always sweet with the scent of the honeysuckles."

Alick turned his great eyes upon her as he spoke; his soft, passionate undertone thrilled her through.

"I never dream," she said distinctly, "and I don't know the way even into a fool's paradise!"

"You mean that it's not I that can open its gate to you."

"I'm very matter of fact," said Annie; "and I'm walking on the road to Redhurst."

It seemed to Alick that her tone was less discouraging than her words. Should he destroy his fool's paradise by telling her for the first time plainly of his love. What had he to say? Nothing but that *if* he could have married he would have married no one but her. Nothing, but that she was the one object of his desire. If only that passionate desire could have been changed into a hope, definite, however distant, what a difference it would have made to him!

But poor Alick was not the man to put his fate to the touch, to force the hand of life and win spite of any number of opposing circumstances. He was afraid of himself in the future, and of losing such transient delight as he had in the present; while Annie, on her side, fought off the chance as a new complication in her puzzling future. Perhaps, had she been able to look to it, it might have settled some of her doubts and difficulties. Alick neither changed the subject nor brought it to a point.

"Yes," he said, "it's the road to Redhurst, but it's all the same high road, you know, to Bridgehurst. It leads all the way from the old bridge. It's a good smooth road, and very easy to travel."

"Dear me, have you been studying the county map? It may be the same road to Aberdeen or to the Land's End, for what I know. 'It's a far cry to Loch Awe!'"

"Well," said Alick, "when I take a constitutional out of Fordham, after a long day's work, I like to think of where the old

road leads to, back to the old school life at Oxley, and most of all to Bridgehurst."

"When places are only a few miles apart they usually *are* connected by the high road," said Annie, mischievously. I'm glad it pleases you. 'Pleasure in roads' is something like 'sermons in stone,' I suppose—good in everything."

Alick laughed.

"Nevertheless," he said, "in that fool's paradise of mine I like to know the path I am treading now is joined to that which—others are treading. But I can walk as far as *this* bit of road from Fordham, and for me it will always bear honeysuckles."

"I'm sure it won't," said Annie, "when Mr. Crichton keeps his hedges cut so neatly," and she lingered till their companions joined them.

Perhaps the remembrance of this sentimental conversation prompted her avoidance of him during the early part of the evening, rather than any attraction of Arthur Spencer's good dancing and good

looks. She was gracious to Alick in and out, as the sense of success gave her self-complacency, but when she returned to Bridgehurst she did not think that his attentions would afford her any relief from the moping and mud : that was all that was left, she thought, after the winter gaieties. With her odd, cool common-sense she thought of Arthur, and of the number of times that he had danced with her. When many people were speculating about him, she was not likely to pass him by ; but she came to the conclusion that he meant good dancing, and nothing more, and that she had not a " chance " in that direction.

Annie might be a schemer, and she had often discoursed to Dulcie about her old heart and her young face ; she might delight in saying plainly to herself what other girls shrink from even imagining, but she was not nearly old enough nor worldly-wise enough to have guessed at the real " chance " that was coming in her way. She had never dreamed that Dr. Osgood, the Master

of St. Jude's, had come to the ball as solely on her account as the penniless and impossible Alick Leighton.

Annie had been a great deal at Willingham at times when the old people were alone, and was a great favourite there. At the worst, it was much less dull than Bridgehurst. General Osgood liked her she was not shy nor taken up with her own pursuits, and was always ready to walk and talk with him.

Dr. Osgood, who had been a young man at the time of Frank Osgood's disappearance, was the youngest of the family, and had recently been chosen master of a small college in which he had long held a fellowship. He was a good deal at his brother's house, and was regarded by the young people as a rather desirable great-uncle.

He was a stiff, stately, old-fashioned clergyman, polite and formal, with a great objection to innovations in religion, politics, or university customs; a handsome, delicate-featured face, and a vast amount of



elegant scholarship. He treated young ladies with old-fashioned care and deference, shewing his liking for them by gentle little jokes and classical compliments. He patronised young men, and endeavoured to test their scholarship in the course of conversation, enlightened their minds, and sublimely snubbed them. He got on very well with the very unscholarly Osgoods, and was liked and civilly treated by the Fordhams. Alick was a great favourite of his; but Geoffrey detested him, argued with him, and disagreed with him. Dulcie laughed sweetly at his jokes and compliments, and never imagined that his mind and hers could touch at any point. May Leighton regarded him as a species of heathen, who did not believe in learned women. Annie Macdonald, however, prided herself on her *savoir faire*, and accommodated her talk to him so successfully that, on the very day after her return from Redhurst, he paid a call on Lady Anne Macdonald, and, to her utter amazement, informed her

that he was a suitor for the hand of her niece.

Lady Anne had a great regard for the Master of St. Jude's, whom she had met on rare occasions ; but she was utterly taken by surprise, and, little as Annie would have given her credit for the feeling, she thought of his age and his formality, before she could turn her mind to his good position and his income."

"Lady Anne," he said, "I come to you in confidence, as, should Miss Macdonald refuse my proposal, I should wish no one to be aware that it was made ; both from regard to my own feelings, and from a wish that no shadow should be cast over the pleasure of her intercourse with my nieces. I know that, with so charming a young lady, I am not likely to be first in the field."

Here he paused, with an expression that made Lady Anne feel that he was perhaps not quite so old as she imagined.

"Mr. Osgood," she said, "you do Annie a great honour. For my part, I should be

most thankful to see her so provided for. I have tried to bring her up in a becoming manner. I feel that her prospects are not happy ones, if she does not marry—but—” here Lady Anne blushed and spoke with some effort, “should she feel no attachment to you, I could not urge her to accept your proposal. I do not say this as a matter of form, it has been the conviction of my life.”

“You think it unlikely that I should inspire——” began the master.

“Not at all,” said Lady Anne, “I heartily hope——” and here she too paused as she began to realize *how* heartily she hoped it.

“I was present at the recent festivities,” he said. “It is perhaps hardly possible that I have not already a rival, when I see what a prize Miss Macdonald’s hand is considered, even for a dance.”

“I believe that Annie is admired,” said Lady Anne, “but I know of nothing to affect your hopes. She is hardly twenty-one, and her opportunities have been few.”

Whether the Master would have thought

that Annie's youth and inexperience gave him cause for hesitation must be uncertain ; for at that moment the young lady herself entered the room.

" Dr. Osgood," she said, surprised, but as she was pleased to see any one and quite unconscious, there was a simple friendliness in her greeting that made her doubly charming.

" Where have you been, Annie ?" said Lady Anne.

" Helping Agnes Royland at the lending library," said Annie ; " here are all these books to mend. But won't Dr. Osgood have some tea ? "

" Stay here, my dear," said her aunt hurriedly ; " the Master of St. Jude's will excuse me."

She intercepted Annie, who had had a view of providing hot buttered toast, and left her standing opposite the Master, who blushed like a school-boy, and said diffidently :

" These charitable occupations, and these

domestic cares, are indeed fitting to fill up a young lady's leisure."

"I've got a great deal too much leisure, Dr. Osgood," said Annie, laughing. "But won't you sit down?"

"No, but I will ask you to do so, while I tell you that I have come here to-day to ask you to leave these 'duties and little cares,' which doubtless have been enough hitherto for your happiness, to leave them for a wider sphere. I have come to ask you to be my wife."

"Oh, I—I never thought of such a thing!" ejaculated Annie, in such amazement that she almost screamed.

"No, I know well that young girls do not think of such things beforehand," said the innocent Master. "Annie, I do not ask a beautiful young girl to be my wife, without serious thoughts of how I could make her happy. It is a busy life, with plenty of society, which I ask you to share. I should never wish to deprive you of the pleasures natural to your age. It is a beautiful old

home to which I would take you ; you will find many friends. And for myself," he added, coming nearer and taking her hand, "I can offer you my hearty love. It is more than five and thirty years ago, my dear, that I loved another Annie, whom it pleased God to take from me and to Himself, before she had even promised to be my wife. I have never cared to supply her place before but with my books. If your heart is free, and if I can make you happy, I—I shall be very happy myself."

Annie burst into tears. The proposal had fallen at her feet like a thunderbolt. The suitor whom she was to marry from motives of common sense had never appeared to her fancy in any such guise as this.

"Oh, Dr. Osgood, I—I'm not at all the sort of girl you think I am. I—I did wish to be married," she said, sobbing.

The Master grew a little pale.

"You mean," he said, "that—that you have already given your affections?"

"No, oh, no! But my life has been very difficult to me. I know quite well what a great advantage it would be for me. I—I should like it! I've planned about it—oh, dear, I don't know what I am saying!"

"I take you by surprise—will you not consider?" said the Master, not in the least understanding her.

Annie recovered herself with a great effort.

"If you please, I will consider," she said, modestly and with dignity.

"I cannot but be thankful that you will grant me so much," said Dr. Osgood, with a more lover-like and less restrained manner; but Annie fled as her aunt's step sounded, and hid herself in her own room.

She had got her chance now, what was she going to do with it? Why should not she marry Dr. Osgood? Annie shut her eyes and tried to think. The venerable college, the interesting society, the ease and dignity and sure position, were better than anything she had imagined; and for the

Master himself, she was conscious of a rush of admiring liking. It was not a common lot that was offered her; but it attracted her. What stood on the other side? A scent of honeysuckle in the air, a flash of sunlight on the river, the thought for a moment of two apart, yet working together for each other and for a common end, a sudden sense of youth and hope and a future not impossible. The vision came upon her like sudden sunlight on a stormy day, and it looked very sweet. But the tears with which she thought of resigning it came more from the instinctive clinging of youth to youth, from the sense of what some people might enjoy, than from a definite return of Alick's love. Whether for good or for evil, Annie had controlled the affections that might have strayed towards him. She did not love him nearly well enough to throw her life away for so vague a hope. It would have been the height of wilful folly to defy and disobey her friends by such an engagement, even if



he—poor fellow!—had not known that too well to ask her—had not known it as well as she did.

But every lot in this world, however fair, shuts out some other, and Annie felt that foolish, baseless hopes might be very sweet for some girls. She had asked time to consider; but her mind was made up before she heard Dr. Osgood drive away, and came down stairs to face Lady Anne.

The lamp was lighted in the little drawing-room. Lady Anne sat by it in her plain black dress, the tea was on the table. As it had been there every evening since Annie came to live there, so it was now. In a corner was a box, which Annie knew contained her aunt's best bonnet, which she had brought down to renovate at as small an expense as possible.

Lady Anne looked at her niece, and Annie knew that she could not but desire intensely that she should take this good fortune that had fallen in her way. She was prepared to be persuaded, and was

surprised when Lady Anne, after a word or two, said :

“My dear, there is one thing that you must not forget. The pleasures natural to your age are not what you will have as Dr. Osgood’s wife. However kind he may be, you will have to give up much.”

“If you mean balls and parties, auntie, I’ve thought too much about real things to care much for them for their own sakes, and I’ve seen how they can become a matter of business.”

“If you can honestly and honourably do this thing,” said Lady Anne, “I know that it will save you from a future that is not bright. I have not been blind to all that has been passing in your mind. I know to what your thoughts have been turned by Miss Venning’s influence, unconscious, no doubt ; she is perfectly trustworthy ; but, believe me, you are quite unfitted for any such life, and you are afraid of your life here with me, or, perhaps, my poor child, without me.”

"Yes," said Annie, with sudden confidence, "and I might get very bad in trying to escape it."

"It is not quite natural that you should face these thoughts at your age," said Lady Anne, as if rather puzzled.

"I began to think so early, Aunt Anne," said Annie.

"My dear," said Lady Anne, with tears in her eyes, "he is a good man, an excellent man—if you were thirty instead of twenty; but it's not quite the right thing, Annie, and I am afraid you don't know what you are about. Do quite right, my child. Even to be an old maid isn't as bad as you think it. But, of course, this is an excellent thing for you."

"Aunt Anne," said Annie, "you are a great deal better than other people, but I'm not. And, besides, I think—I feel quite sure—that I should like very much to marry Dr. Osgood. That's the truth."

"Then, in that case, Annie, I can only be

thankful for the good thing that has fallen in your way."

Such was the view taken by half the neighbourhood when Miss Macdonald's engagement to the Master of St. Jude was announced. Others declared Annie to be a sacrifice to her aunt's ambition, and some said that it was a shame of a man of *that* age to think of a pretty girl like Annie. Still it was a fine chance for a penniless Macdonald.

The Osgoods themselves thought the Master very foolish; but it was his own concern, not theirs, and Mrs. Osgood wrote civilly to Lady Anne, begging her to bring Annie to Willingham while the Master was still with them.

The engagement was announced at once, and the visit to Willingham was fixed for little more than a week after the ball at Oxley.

Annie stood on the old bridge, on the afternoon before she went to pay this betrothal visit. The frost had now broken

up, and the roads and lanes were thick with yellow mud ; but the river was all alive and sparkling ; there was life and hope of spring in the warm brown colouring of the wooded banks, and the sun was setting in a bank of soft driving clouds.

“Plenty of mud,” thought Annie ; “but not much time for moping.”

She was still excited by the great change that had befallen her, and of all the comments, only congratulatory ones had reached her ears, though she could not but read between the lines of Dulcie's little note, almost childish as it was in its stiff, formal, and surprised good wishes ; and when on the day before she had met Florence Venning in Oxley High Street, the absence of any sitting in judgment on her choice was too evidently intentional to be quite reassuring. There was one other who had sent no congratulations, and, suddenly, as she turned her head, Alick Leighton stood beside her.

His face had a very miserable expression

as he looked down at her with his great melancholy eyes.

"Is it true?" he said, as she gave him her hand.

"Yes," said Annie.

She was guiltless of having flirted with Alick, or encouraged him unduly. He had nothing to reproach her with, and yet she felt ashamed.

"Well," he said, after a moment's silence, "I have nothing to say against it."

"I suppose not," she said, trying to laugh.

"I hope you'll like it," he said, with a deep sigh, and then half a smile; "but it's no news to you that I don't! No one's to blame, only myself, for being the sort of fellow I am. I shall never win any prizes that don't drop into my mouth. But Geoff would have won if he had cared as I do."

"That he wouldn't," said Annie, impulsively; "I never liked Geoffrey at all!"

Poor Alick's face brightened up; but he checked himself, and took no advantage of

the inference ; he only looked at her, at the sunlight shining on her hair and lighting up her face.

"I saw you first in the sunshine," he said, "just here. Good bye ! Do you know the Master's awfully popular at St. Jude's ? Good bye, Aslauga !"

Annie gave him her hand ; but she did not speak. She shrank from his eyes, and her heart was stirred within her. Alick squeezed the hand hard, then let it go, and only watched her as she hurried away. Perhaps he did not know how strong had been his momentary power over her. As he said, Geoff might perhaps have won her ; but Alick had no such courageous hope as to justify him in attempting to upset and destroy her own way of being happy.

She had but little time to think of him in the excitement of her reception at Willingham, and in the pleasant novelty of finding herself for the first time a person of importance. The young girls—for the grandchildren were still paying their Christmas

visit—received her with fits of laughing, and dubbed her “great auntie” on the spot, a title which was very prettily carried off by their great-uncle remarking :

“I have old-fashioned tastes, and do not, perhaps, appreciate the triumphs of modern art ; but I have seen a picture of which Effie’s joke reminds me. It is a lovely young girl, in the first bloom of her beauty, dressed, I think, in an old-fashioned riding suit. The title given to it was ‘Grand-mama.’ The charm was increased by the incongruity. So it is in this case.”

Effie clapped her hands, exclaiming that she had never heard such a pretty compliment.

“So you see an old master and a young mistress. Now, mistress mine, will you put on that modern riding-dress that suits you so well, and come and have a lesson ?”

For the Master was a good horseman, and teaching Annie to ride formed a pleasant occupation in common, and a convenient method for carrying on what the



young people would have liked to call his "spooning."

"Only," as the critical Effie observed, "Uncle Charles is such an incarnation of good taste that it would be impossible to apply such a word to him."

"No more than you would to a pretty old song!" said Dulcie, who had been invited to dine and sleep, and see Annie. "It reminds one of those quaint complimentary Chloes and Strephons, who used to sing and make speeches to each other."

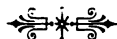
Dulcie did not choose to speak to any of the Osgoods of the sense of oppression that Annie's engagement had given her. She thought of Geoffrey, and how she and he stood hand in hand and looked out on life together—the young fresh life at which they looked with equal eyes. *This* was so different. Most people, however, incline to the favourable view of a marriage engagement once begun, and Dulcie was learning that there are different ways of being

happy, that the very best and first was not for all, and yet that they needed something.

So, in spite of her regrets for Alick's sake, she came to think that Annie's fate was a pretty and graceful thing in its way—as, indeed, it was, for no one could fail to like the Master, who was so good that his heart was young if his manners were old; and, while he was more quaint and old-world than his actual age warranted, was also much more active and vigorous than it might have been supposed to allow. He took care of Annie, and treated her with a scrupulous courtesy and gallantry that constantly surprised her. Nor did he expect much of her. His view was that a lady would naturally have her own pursuits, which would differ from a man's. He did not expect that Annie should interest herself in his studies, and looked from an indulgent distance on all her little occupations. Indeed, he condescended to her more than Dulcie would have liked. She, who already

knew quite as much about the duties of school inspector as Geoffrey did, would have had a thousand things to ask about University life and manners; but Annie took it all very much for granted. She liked the notion of an easy life, and had just faced the world enough on her own account to feel that she would like to be done for, for the future. Moreover, the Master of St. Jude's pleased her; she grew fonder of him every day, and more sure of her own happiness. He was so indulgent that she did not feel afraid of the high, pure standard so infinitely above her own, though she had never known that any one could be quite so good. The Master's modest and yet strict performance of all his religious duties surprised her; as she began to have an inkling of it, she began to feel a certain restraint of the tongue, which he habitually practised. He was not a person with any gift for influencing others, being very silent on topics near his heart; but he was held in high respect by the young men among

whom he lived, however much they might differ from his views, and perhaps his example had more weight than they, or he, guessed.



## CHAPTER XXI.

### TENNYSON'S POEMS.

"An old affront will stir the heart,  
Through years of rankling pain."

DURING the interval between their parting at Oxley and their meeting at Sloane House, Dulcie's letters to Geoffrey were filled with the events occupying her friends. Her wonder at Annie's choice, and her growing liking for the good and kindly Master, had a due place. She told how bright and well Annie looked on horseback with her lover, and how, after all, they were a distinguished-looking couple; how Florence would not say that it was a bad thing, or feel sure that Annie would have been happier as a governess; from which Dulcie thought that Florence herself inclined a little towards Mr. Blandford, who, though much younger than Dr. Osgood, stood also on a high pedestal of dulness and learning

in Dulcie's youthful estimation. But all these topics paled before the interest of the Oakenshaw mystery, and she poured out every detail of the disappearance ; of Arthur's distress at it ; of Mr. Crichton's bad opinion of the runaway ; of poor little Minnie's hopeless misery ; and of the many consultations held as to what was to become of her ; how Mr. Crichton declared that the only way to find the father was to advertise, saying that Minnie should be sent to the workhouse ; but how Mrs. Jones had declared that that should never be, if she had to keep the poor child herself. She told how Mr. Spencer had come one day to the Manor, and had confessed to Florence that he feared Mr. Oakenshaw had put an end to himself ; and how, finally, he and his aunt had agreed to pay the expenses of Minnie's board with Mrs. Jones for the present, and afterwards, if nothing could be heard of her relations, to send her to school. " But," Dulcie wrote, " she will be a great responsibility, for besides being so

delicate, she is so passionate and self-willed that no one can manage her properly. If anything had turned up about her father's past life and drove him to desperation, it was cruel to bring it up when he was living in such a harmless way."

How Geoffrey read these letters—how they diverted his mind from the school work he was daily learning—may be imagined; and when Dulcie came—and even while he brought her from the station—poured out the story once again, in the intervals of hearing of Geoffrey's school experiences, he stopped her account of the worry and anxiety experienced by Arthur and the Crichtons with an abrupt speech :

"It can be nothing to them, compared to what it is to—to that man himself, or to the child. They are only strangers. Why should they care? It is no disgrace to them."

"Why, as to strangers," said Dulcie, "if Mr. Spencer does not care, there is nobody else. And it is a horrid responsibility for them."

Geoffrey said nothing. His conscience had not been idle since that fatal night. He knew that in pushing away from him the suddenly realised horror of his life, he had acted a harsh and selfish part, that he had done the wrong thing and not the right ; but he had not thought much of the consequences to his enemy, as he felt him to be.

Now the suggestion that haunted Arthur's kind heart came fresh upon him from Dulcie's lips. He could not believe it. But clear and without a doubt was the claim of the deserted child on him or on his : this hot-tongued, loud-voiced, auburn-haired creature, whom he remembered rushing across the ice, as eager at her sport as he himself could have been, who was such a "horrid responsibility" to the charitable friends who were providing for her.

He had done wrong, and now the right thing to do was so obvious and so simple : to tell his father—to tell Mr. Leighton, the kind and honourable kinsman, the wise



lawyer—who Minnie was. He had acted once with absolute justice, with infinite kindness, and so would he act again. The connections of the unfortunate Frank Osgood were all kind and honourable people ; every one of them would act rightly and fairly. If that had been all. But for Geoffrey himself, was not more needed ? What would be the result to him ?

He was much too straightforward, and too conscientious a person, not to know that he was doing wrong, and to be miserable in the knowledge ; but he could not bring himself to do right.

In the delight of welcoming Dulcie at Sloane House, Oxley affairs fell into the background, till they were revived by May, who was very indignant at Annie MacDonald's engagement. "To marry because life was dull ! Now, when so many fields were open ! For my part," said May, "I think it a great mistake to be unpractical, and to think only of intellectual concerns. These new cookery and ambulance classes

are most interesting, and I hope Dulcie will join them. They would be something quite new for the Silkworms."

"If one provided the cake for tea," said Dulcie. "That's rather a good notion—if —if it was nice."

"Or a broken leg, well set," suggested Fred. "The question would be—whose?"

There was a great laugh at this, increased by May observing that there was always a boy on purpose at the classes.

"On purpose to have his leg broken? Haven't you got to pay him very highly?" said Fred.

"No, no—nonsense!" said May. Of course, it is only for practice. But the Silkworms might take it in turns; or we might get one of Miss Flossy's school children."

"Ask Geoff," suggested Fred. "Has he to inspect broken legs and tea-cakes?"

"No," said Geoffrey, trying to join in the chatter; "but I did think of getting mother to explain the *Manual of Domestic*

*Economy* to me. And the ~~needle~~ work! If *needle*  
I knew which was running and felling, and *which writing*  
which was sewing. I thought it was all  
sewing."

"Innocent Geoffrey!" said Mr. Leighton.  
"He thinks it is necessary to be able to do  
himself what he has to criticize."

"Shall I lend you a thimble, Geoff?"  
said Dulcie, "and give you a lesson."

"The schoolmistress at St.—said very  
emphatically, when I asked her about it,  
that 'some gentlemen did *appear* to  
understand needlework—they pulled it  
very hard to see if it was strong.' But I  
thought she despised me."

"Of course," said May, "girls' schools  
ought to be inspected by ladies. We  
should do it much better. The present is  
a rotten system."

"No such thing," said Geoffrey. "I  
mean to make it a reality. And I shall  
not be bound by any narrow-minded  
officialism. I shall be very glad to hear  
what any of you girls have to say about

your school-children. The benevolent voluntary principle is a most valuable one."

And so they laughed, and discussed, and teased each other as of old, and had delightful expeditions together, with entrancing hopes for the future. What could equal the peculiar charm that should be found in the nest which they were to build next year, the little plans that would be their own and nobody else's? "We will do this." "We will have it that way." In the sweet and natural self-assertion of this happy time, Geoffrey nearly forgot his self-reproach. One afternoon, when he was busy with some of his professional preparations, May and Dulcie were engaged in wasting a good deal of butter, flour, sugar, and eggs in the attempt to make cakes for tea. Mr. Leighton, for a wonder, was at home, and for a still greater wonder, was enjoying a quiet hour with his wife in the drawing-room, and their talk fell on the condition and prospects of

their girls and boys, and especially of the twins, who were now both about to start in life on their own account.

A satisfactory letter about Alick had been received from Mr. Fordham, and his mother congratulated herself on his having really found his vocation. She hoped any foolish fancy for Annie Macdonald had not gone far enough to render him unhappy.

"I feel quite hopeful and happy about them both," she said. "Geoff is perfectly devoted to Dulcie, and she is the very sweetest girl. James, how thankful I am now that we decided as we did about the boys. How truly we love them both, and how impossible it has always been to make any difference between them. It troubled me for years, and now I never think of it."

"I can truly say that I love them both," said Mr. Leighton; "and they are both good sons to me. Geoffrey has been more tried than Alick by the doubt; but as his life becomes settled and individual, he will care less about his parentage."

"Yes, romantic troubles are the right of youth," said Mrs. Leighton. "I think I must see if those girls are going to use all the eggs in the house."

She went away, laughing as she spoke, and Mr. Leighton sat on by the fire, and thought over the two boys under discussion; the utter perplexity at first, the wish to know changing into indifference, and then into a fear of knowing, and then an almost entire forgetfulness that there was anything to know. Mr. Leighton knew that his wife had really so schooled herself at first that she had never formed an opinion. Her impressions had long been contradictory, and she had never allowed herself to dwell on them, and he felt that this was a right reward for her single-minded effort to conquer a kind of injustice almost instinctive to a mother in such a case. Her instincts had been mercifully turned to the defence and claiming of both the children who had lain at her breast, and she had never used her

judgment or her reason on the subject. Perhaps to the father had come the harder task of drawing a conclusion which he veiled in absolute silence.

His reflections were disturbed by the announcement of a visitor—"Mr. Arthur Spencer."

Mr. Leighton was surprised to see him, as he had been invited to dine that evening with his cousins, with whom the Leightons were well acquainted; but Arthur, anxious to lose no time about the consultation on which he had set his heart, and unwilling to give it so formal an aspect as seeking Mr Leighton at his chambers might have worn, had run the chance of finding him, and now received a very cordial greeting.

"Mr. Spencer, delighted to see you," said Mr. Leighton, rising. "My son told me that he hoped we might be able to make your acquaintance."

"Your sons were both very kind in asking me to come here," said Arthur, as he shook hands.

“Yes, said Mr. Leighton. “How is Mr. James Crichton? he has discovered several barbarisms in our treatment of this old house, and we are trying to be worthy of our panels and tall mantel-pieces. My wife is at home.”

“I have ventured,” said Arthur, “to entertain a hope that you would allow me to ask if you have formed any opinion on a troublesome matter, which, perhaps, Miss Fordham may have mentioned to you. Hence my call to-day.”

“Any wisdom I have is at your service. You mean this mysterious disappearance of your clerk. Come into the next room. We can talk there, undisturbed by the teacups.”

Mr. Leighton led the way into his study as he spoke, lighted the gas, and motioned Arthur to a seat by the fire, and then listened while Arthur sketched out all his previous knowledge of Oakenshaw, adding:

“He was melancholy, and down on his



luck always; but there was something attractive about him—a sort of warmth of manner. I must own that I always thought he was under a cloud of some kind, but I am sure he has been all right of late years. He did not drink, and had no bad habits that I could see. I was surprised to see him turn up at the skating; it was evidently a favourite old sport. He skated splendidly. Then the child fell in, and your son and I pulled her out. I was rather done up with the cold water, and your son kindly went to ask for her, and Oakenshaw was all right then, and very grateful. He came to my cousin on business the next morning from the Board, but I saw no more of him, and that night he went out from his lodgings and disappeared. And that is absolutely all we know or can find out.”

“Leaving the child?”

“Oh, yes, and she was ill too with her accident. My cousin says that either he suddenly found himself face to face with

some old scrape which he hoped was forgotten, or that he deliberately left the child on our hands. That last I don't believe. Hugh says that if we made it plain that Minnie had nothing to expect from us, he might reappear. But if I, or my aunt, or my cousin himself would put on such a screw, the good old landlady would never give in to it. We have done everything but put the matter into the hands of detectives, and Hugh says I ought to consider what reasons Oakenshaw may have for making himself scarce, and what might be the consequence to him of discovery. Myself, I sometimes feel afraid that—if he had any secret dread—he may have made discovery impossible."

"Any eccentricity about him?"

"Oh, no, I should say not. But life had pressed him hard, and perhaps he reached the limit of endurance."

"Did he leave no clue behind him?"

"The only thing we found was an early copy of Tennyson's Poems, a gentleman's

library sort of looking book, with 'From L. B. to F. O.' in the beginning, and a crest torn out."

Mr. Leighton paused, then stretched his hand out to a shelf beside him.

"A book of this sort?"

"Why, yes, exactly! It is just this dull red colour, and has that little pattern stamped round the edge. Was it a fashion of the time in binding?"

Mr. Leighton did not answer. He took the book out of Arthur's hand before he opened it.

"Of what age was—Oakenshaw?" he said.

"I should think something over fifty. One thing more. I got this note from him on the morning after his disappearance, posted at his own door."

Mr. Leighton took the envelope and looked at it, then slowly drew out the note which Arthur had previously shown to Hugh.

Mr. Leighton stood looking fixedly at

the letter, and as Arthur rose, following his example, his eyes were caught by an envelope on the mantel-piece.

"Why—that is Oakenshaw's writing!" he exclaimed.

Mr. Leighton looked too.

"No," he said, "this letter is from one of my sons."

"Oh, excuse me," said Arthur, "I was struck by a chance resemblance."

Then suddenly, back upon his mind came some half-forgotten knowledge of the black sheep once belonging to the Osgoods, of the Leightons' connection with him, and of the subsequent mystery—a bit of gossip heard in his youth, but which he had never much heeded.

He looked dumbfounded. Mr. Leighton laid the letter on the table, and his own hand upon it.

"I see," he said, "that you begin to perceive that I may have more interest than yourself in your story."

"Yes, I perceive," said Arthur.

He moved away a little, leaving Mr. Leighton to recover from this startling surprise, but after a minute came back and said: "I think you recognise Oakenshaw's writing as that of your cousin—one of the Osgoods?"

"Yes, that book belonged to my first cousin, Frank Osgood, General Osgood's great nephew, and was given to him by his first wife—my wife's cousin, Lettice Barlow. Old Mr. Barlow was fond of well-bound books, and gave many such to his relations. The note you showed me is in his writing. Here is one with which you may compare it," unlocking and searching in a table-drawer.

"Yes," said Arthur. "This is the writing of a younger man, not in a hurry, but it is the same."

"And here," said Mr. Leighton, "is a daguerreotype of Frank."

"I should not have known this," said Arthur; "but I did mistake one of your sons for Oakenshaw on the ice."

"There is no doubt on the subject," said Mr. Leighton.

There was a silence, and then Arthur said :

"I was always conscious of much in Oakenshaw which such a connection accounts for. I should like to say that—that I think you would be agreeably surprised in your cousin. Perhaps I ought hardly to venture on such a remark."

"Thank you!" said Mr. Leighton. "There must be full confidence between us. And first, Frank is in no danger. That was provided for at the time. I don't suppose he is aware of this.

"You see," he added, as Arthur did not speak, "that your cousin was right in his view."

"As to the past, yes," said Arthur.

"Of course," said Mr. Leighton, "I cannot pretend that his reappearance would not in any case be a trial; but neither General Osgood nor myself would shrink from our duty towards him, and

certainly not to his child. The little girl will in no case want for friends. And for my part, I would rather my cousin honestly earned his living in his own name, if it is possible. We must not exaggerate either the connection or the disgrace of it."

"It could not affect you — or the Osgoods," said Arthur.

"No. So far, you see, I should willingly meet Frank Osgood, and own his little daughter openly as my cousin. I ought assuredly to give him credit for the effort you say he has made, and such sorrows as his *must* claim pity."

He paused, and Arthur said, simply :

"I think that is quite right."

"Yes. But the discovery of Frank's existence will cause great perplexity and distress. Hitherto, I have acted towards him and his with perfect openness. I scarcely know now how I can do so. The burden will not fall on *me*. What has never been a secret has probably been made a matter of talk, and you will know

that either Geoffrey or Alick is the son of my cousin Frank."

"I heard—I don't think I quite believed it."

"If he turns up, what is *their* duty? And their mother—my wife?"

Mr. Leighton's tone lost its judicial calmness. He rose and walked over to the fire. Arthur rose also.

"Do they know?" he said.

"Oh, yes. They know the fact. But now, what perplexity of feeling, what painful difficulties must come on them, and on one how unjustly. While what good can they do to Frank? And the little girl, too. I cannot decide. Yet any sort of recognition of her, or any kind of intercourse, would lead them to suspect the truth at once."

"As for Minnie," said Arthur, "she is quite safe at present, and as well off as she can be without her father. I think that, now that I know that it is safe for him to return, I could so word an advertisement



as to discover Oakenshaw, if—if he is anywhere to see it. And, whatever may be necessary in the long run, I see no occasion for telling the poor boys anything about it, as things are at present.”

“Yes, I think you are right. We have always made as little mystery as possible of a painful business. But there is a mystery which can never be legally cleared up, and therefore we have never speculated on probabilities. I don’t think the secret can be permanently kept from them, if we do our duty. Besides, there are the Osgoods. The son of Frank and his first wife would have been my charge anyhow—she and my wife were as sisters. But my connection with *this* child is much slighter than theirs.”

“They could not help us now,” said Arthur. “Why need we create an excitement until we have found him? Then—well, I suppose he could not complain, if you all refused to acknowledge his existence?”

“I shall not do that. My wife and I

have always felt, and tried to teach the boys to feel, that the only way to endure this peculiar trial was to accept its facts thoroughly. We have had very little else in life to complain of.

"But you, Mr. Spencer," he added, after a moment's pause, "I am leaving this trouble on you, and, with regard to the girl, some expense, I fear. That ought not to be."

"Oh," said Arthur, "the expense at present is a mere trifle; I must own that I am glad to find that she has relations; for, of course, she would be a good deal of trouble to mine, and somehow I did not quite like to give her over entirely to good Mrs. Jones. But as far as Oakenshaw is concerned, you see—what you tell me about him seems far away, and I can only think of the poor fellow crying over his babies, and lost without his wife, and having no friend. I should like to tell Hugh the truth, if I may, and then I think his clear head would help us."

“You may do whatever you please,” said Mr. Leighton, grasping his hand with a smile; “you have been perfectly kind to me. We are to see you and Mr. and Mrs. Crichton to dinner to-night, I believe. I shall say nothing to Mrs. Leighton till afterwards.”

Mr. Leighton saw that Arthur had endeavoured to put the idea of his lost kinsman before him in as pleasing a way as possible; and there was something in his manner of claiming the unfortunate exile as his friend, which Mr. Leighton thought exceptionally generous, though Arthur had merely stated the simple fact. He did like Oakenshaw, why should he not say so? Mr. Leighton, of course, dreaded the character of his kinsman; it was a good thing that he could truthfully say something in his favour.

But Mr. Leighton was too sure of his own good name, and too generous himself, to have done anything but rejoice in the discovery of his cousin's respectability,

even in the inconvenience of his return.

It was the sense of the utter perplexity, of what could be the duty and the feelings of Geoffrey and Alick towards him, when they knew who he was, and when he came to doubt who they were. The interesting story told and forgotten among all their acquaintances would start into a dreadful life. It was impossible to say how either might take it ; and little as the unfortunate father could claim from a son, he could not be an object of indifference, and the little sister ought not to be so.

Besides, who knew what opinion Frank might form on the matter, or what new suggestions his appearance might bring out ? The facts connected with him were painful and discreditable ; it was impossible to say how Captain Fordham might regard them ; and Geoffrey, at least, might have much to suffer ; while keen and sharp came again into James Leighton's heart the thought of how cruel it was that *his*

son should have to bear a share of this unhappy inheritance.

He found time to write a long and affectionate letter to Alick, telling him to get a holiday soon and come and see them ; while, finding Geoffrey at home on his return to the drawing-room, he asked him about his day's work with unusual interest. The especial kindness of his manner to the boy all the evening struck Arthur Spencer with a great sense of pity.

The party were not very comfortable, and Mrs. Leighton completely misunderstood the reason. The greeting between Dulcie and Arthur was exceedingly cordial, and both found the Manor and its inhabitants an agreeable subject in common, though he put aside her inquiries for Minnie. Dulcie's manner was always warm and kind, and her face lit up in a moment with interest and pleasure.

There was a great deal of agreeable talk. Mr. James Crichton had always the newest topics at his tongue's tip ; but the ever

argumentative Geoffrey was at first silent. His mother saw that he avoided Arthur's eye, and was afraid that he disliked Dulcie's intimacy with so attractive a person. "It was foolish of Geoff," she thought, being much too just to accuse Dulcie.

But Geoffrey was innocent of this folly. He hardly observed Dulcie, for the sight of Arthur filled him with self-reproach. When he recollected all that Arthur had told him, and how eagerly interested he himself had been about the Oakenshaws, he was haunted with the notion that Arthur would expect him to inquire after them ; yet how could he do so ? But when he caught Arthur looking at him gravely for a moment as they sat at dinner, the dread of his suspicions made him jerk out suddenly in his abrupt voice a question that would have been inappropriate to the moment had Arthur's feelings only been in question.

" Oh, by the way, did the little girl get well—and—and have you heard of her father yet ? "

His question silenced Mr. Leighton, and silenced James Crichton, who knew that the incident referred to had been very painful to his cousin ; while Arthur, who could not fail to feel conscious and nervous in his host's presence, started and coloured.

"I have heard nothing from him," he said ; "the little girl is not well, I am afraid."

"It seems a very sad story," said Mrs. Leighton kindly. "Miss Fordham has been telling us about it, among other pleasanter memories of the Oxley visit."

She turned the point skilfully ; but Arthur could hardly get over it, he felt so sorry for the proud-spirited youth who had to hear of his own share in the sad story.

"He won't be a gentle judge," he thought, as he watched the stern set of Geoffrey's fair features ; and then all in a moment a new idea crossed his mind. Could the strong resemblance that was making his heart ache for the poor boy have been apparent to Geoffrey himself or to Oaken-

shaw? Could this be the clue to the mystery of the clerk's disappearance?

Arthur put the idea resolutely away for the present, but he did not discard it.

And after all Geoffrey and Dulcie nearly had their first quarrel; for when she told him that she thought he had been very inconsiderate to start so painful a subject in the middle of dinner, he asked vehemently why it should be especially painful.

"You know it is, Geoff, to Mr. Spencer."

"What is it to him?" said Geoffrey passionately. "It's nothing—nothing at all to him. Why should he care for—for a fellow like that?"

Mrs. Leighton felt her uncomfortable theory confirmed by his vehemence, and his father said gently—

"Hush, Geoffrey! That is not the way for you to speak of it, my dear boy."

Geoffrey's sensitive ear caught the gravity of the tone, and in the sudden fear of what it might portend, he forgot to be angry at the rebuke.



## CHAPTER XXII.

### ALICK'S NIGHT WATCH.

“But as for you ——

You on all hands you have the best of me.”

WHILE these strange events were agitating the minds of his family, Alick, by himself at Fordham, was utterly absorbed in the change in his own outlook. He had always been more or less unhappy about Annie Macdonald; he had never expected—had hardly hoped—to win her, and yet her existence had given sweetness to his life, and for more than four years she had been the pervading spirit of his universe. If he had never been hopeful, he had never been quite hopeless; he knew that she had not been entirely indifferent to him, and lately, since he had felt more satisfied with himself,

and felt himself to be really coming up to the mark required of him, little as he saw his way to the chance of marrying, it had not seemed impossible to him. But now! If the love of pleasant hours had formerly tempted Alick to idleness and inefficiency, the weight of disappointment made exertion doubly distasteful to him.

How often during those four youthful years, when he ought to have been reading, or might have been actively amusing himself, had Alick dawdled along the meadow paths by that slow river side. How sweet he had found the sunny peace of the low-lying country. How blue had been the sky; how bright the water; how fair the wooded slopes. Alick knew each creek and course, every lock and bridge for miles along the river—had known them in his school days, even before Annie's time. The long straight lane between two high walls, with a strip of sky between, that led from the town to the river side, behind which were old brown houses buried in trees. He knew the little

tavern where the boats were hired, with its scarlet geraniums and muslin curtains, and gaily painted boats. He knew how the boat could steal along over the smooth, easy, lowland stream, till the banks grew rough and sweet with river plants, and the green meadows stretched away till the willows gave place to elms, and the banks grew higher, till the old bridge came to view. Alick knew the whole population of the river banks, and he had wasted hours and hours over that country side, partly from love of the sweet places and delight in idle, kindly observation and enjoyment, but most of all for the chance of a golden-haired maiden coming across his path. Some half-a-dozen sweet meetings there had been—some few golden days. And Alick, self-conscious, and, alas! self-indulgent, had extracted pleasure from his own pleasure in these fair sights, and from his own love for the sunny-haired girl whom he called his Aslauga. Sunlit and shining as her image was, poor Annie in herself was but an

earthly version of the heavenly lady love of Fouqué's knight ; but such as she was, she was Alick's light ahead, and now he was left in darkness.

He did not feel angry ; he did not think that he was very miserable—that is to say, much more miserable than he had often been before. The wintry weather made the country dreary ; there was nothing doing on the river. James Fordham, as befitted a friend, rushed over to condole with him, and, as also befitted a friend, took the opportunity of hoping that he would leave off “loafing about” *now*, and turn his mind vigorously to his profession, and forget a girl who had never cared a pin for him.

“Oh, yes, she did care—a pin,” said Alick ; “but a pin doesn't amount to much.”

It must not be understood that Alick, since his residence in Fordham, had had unlimited time at his disposal. Mr. Blandford was a vigorous parish priest, and taught him his future duties with unremit-

ting energy, besides requiring from him a large amount of study. Alick had many suitable qualities, and work done for others was not so distasteful to him as work done for himself. He made himself useful, and learnt his trade well, and the days of his first loss of Annie were varied by superintending a soup kitchen, and by getting up a school treat, to say nothing of his more regular work. The curate was absent on a holiday, and Alick was obliged to do as much as possible of his work. He did not do it quite as well as usual ; but most people know of such troubles as his, in a country neighbourhood, and Mr. Blandford had mercy on him.

But as Alick stumbled through his day's work, there was a kind of chill settling on his spirit. He was not a person to undergo a definite, passionate struggle ; many people would have been far more upset for the time by his trouble, but a feeling that nothing was worth while gained upon him ; he was ready to let everything slide. It

was not in his line to seek forgetfulness by excitement, but a little comfort might be won by the absence of effort, and hours of smoking and idle reading slipped by much more easily than hours of work.

Neither pride nor principle came strongly just then to his aid ; but he had always entertained a sympathy for people who were not very fortunate. He had a fellow feeling for failure ; and as his work brought him in contact with many failures and much misfortune, he was more roused by the desire to make people a little less unhappy than by anything else, and perhaps the sense of benevolence was soothing to his self-respect.

Aliç had been set to learn the harder parts of parish visiting, under the curate's superintendence, in some of the back slums of Fordham, and in a street of lodging-houses beyond the power of the ordinary lady visitors. In these regions he had made some way, had routed himself out a class of lads, and had established re-

lations with a young shopman, who was dying of consumption after a career by no means pleasant to look back upon. However low and dismal Alick felt, he hadn't the heart to disappoint George Greaves of the book and the chat which interested him, and enabled him to talk out some of his very crude notions of life in general, and one misty, chilly afternoon he presented himself, with "Two Years Ago," and as cheerful a greeting as he could muster. He was always very civil to the untidy landlady, and she presently told him that she had another sick man in the house, a "Mr. Jones," who had fallen ill immediately on his arrival, but had refused to see either a doctor or district visitor. Now, however, he was so much worse, that she was growing frightened, and wished Mr. Leighton would step up. The lodger had paid a month in advance and seemed respectable.

"What is the matter with him?" asked Alick.

"Something of the rheumatic fever," was the reply, as he was conducted up another flight of stairs, and rapidly introduced as "a gentleman come to see you, sir."

The room was half darkened, and the sick lodger was lying in bed, so that Alick could scarcely see him, as he said cheerfully:

"Good morning, I'm sorry to hear that you are very unwell."

At the sound of his voice, the sick man started, pushed back the coverings and exclaimed "Who is it?"

"Mr. Leighton! I am engaged in helping Mr. Blandford, the vicar."

"You promised to leave me in peace if I hid myself out of your sight!" he cried; then, before Alick could answer, as he caught sight of him more plainly, "Ah! I beg pardon, I am mistaking you for some one else."

Alick looked at him, fancied the face was familiar, and remembering in a moment the story of the lost clerk of the Local Board,



recognised him at once. He sent the landlady to fetch the doctor without asking the patient's leave, and paved the way to an explanation by asking how long the sick man had been ill.

"Not very long. I have a touch of rheumatic fever. I have had it before and know how to treat myself. There is no occasion to send for the doctor."

"Well," said Alick, "it's as well to shake a thing off quickly as to let it hang on for ever. Especially, Mr. Oakenshaw, as I suppose this illness is the reason why you have left your friends at Oxley in such uncertainty and inconvenience."

Oakenshaw turned painfully round on his very untidy pillows, and looked at Alick, whose identity puzzled him, as he had not observed him especially on the ice.

"You—know me," said he, with a sort of throb at his heart, as he wondered what the "knowing" amounted to."

"Why, yes," said Alick, "I saw you when your little girl fell into the water, and

I heard of your disappearance. Now, I hope you will let me send a line to Mr. Crichton; why haven't you done so before?"

"But that other—gentleman. There was a Mr. Leighton on the ice."

"That was my brother," returned Alick, pulling up the blind a little. "I am so glad I have found you out."

"But you must keep my secret. Indeed, I cannot make myself known in Oxley; you do not know what you are saying. *Glad* that you have found me! Give me your promise never to reveal my existence."

"Well," said Alick, "we won't talk any more about it now. I've just sent to ask the doctor to look round. And don't you think you'd be the better for some one to make you a little more comfortable?"

"Give me your promise," reiterated Oakenshaw, and Alick, to quiet him, promised to say nothing till the next morning; though he had no intention whatever of finally concealing his discovery, either from Arthur Spencer or Mr. Blandford.

He was not very clear as to the facts of the case, and was not disposed to think them creditable to the runaway; but his present business was to look after his bodily condition, and the doctor, declaring him to be suffering from a sharp attack of rheumatic fever, and in much need of good nursing, Alick went off to look for the parish nurse, and, as she could not come till the next morning, proposed, with a view to getting into the confidence of the patient, to go and sit up with him. He might find out what was amiss at Oxley, and put matters in a better train. He found, however, that he had undertaken rather more than he had bargained for. He had no notion how to nurse any one so ill as Oakenshaw proved to be, and could only hope that he was better than nothing. Surely, he thought, he must manage very badly, for his presence seemed only to excite the poor fellow, even when quite off his head. Why in the world did he worry himself so about names, asking him over

and over again what he was called, in the midst of rambling recollections of India. Alick made as little answer as he could ; he felt rather frightened and very helpless, and had nearly made up his mind to call the landlady, when, in the midst of much incoherent groaning and muttering, one sentence fell clear on his ear.

*"He knows I am Frank Osgood."*

Alick was making up the fire. He turned round with the poker in his hand, and stood still, staring. The sound struck his ear like a blow, yet he hardly entered into it. What would come next ?

"I can't have it known—Spencer always knew I was a gentleman—but old Osgood wouldn't welcome me—even if James——"

Here his voice became indistinct again, as he cried out with the pain he was suffering, and murmured something about Minnie and the ice.

Alick put down the poker and went quietly up to the bed, and looked at him. He looked, and though he recognised no

special likeness, there was nothing in the air and features which made it seem impossible that this should be "a near relation."

Alick stood and looked till he felt his knees tremble, and the room swayed before his eyes. He stumbled back to his chair by the fire, and gasped for breath.

What had happened to him? What was the matter with him? Why did he feel ready to faint? He got better in a minute and then he hid his face in his hands and tried to think. As he had never been in the habit of thinking about his peculiar circumstances, the discovery fell with almost more overwhelming force on him than it had done on Geoffrey. And though Alick had never speculated about Frank Osgood, he had always considered that he possibly owed a duty to him, and his childish prayer had not been disused nor uttered always without meaning. Alick found himself repeating it as a sort of connecting link. But how horrible it was, how dread-

ful! He grew so frightened that he dared not uncover his face; he dared not look at his near relation; and for some time he let the painful sounds pass him unheeded, till at last the idea came back to him that he must go and do what he could.

He got up and went over to the bed; but as he lifted the patient up, his hands trembled, and he could hardly keep back the tears of excitement and distress.

"Is that better?" he tried to say.

"Yes, thank you, you're very good," and at these words, spoken more rationally, an awful, incomprehensible feeling came over Alick, an agony, not quite all bitter. How he got through the next half-hour he could not tell; but at the end of it, when the patient was quieter, he found that he had recovered his senses, and could consider what he ought to do next.

He did not know the past history, even as well as Geoffrey did; he could not tell at all how far Frank Osgood would be endangered by a discovery. Arthur Spencer

was away. Mr. Spencer Crichton was a magistrate, and perhaps could not keep such a secret. Besides, the business was not theirs any longer. If he told his father, if he told James Leighton, Alick felt as Geoffrey had done, that it was all up with them both, that they could never again be as they had been before.

He had no right to tell this family secret even to the Vicar—he could not in the least tell how any one might think it right to act. There was only one person on whom the blow would fall equally with himself, whose duty was the same, on whose fellow-feeling he could reckon.

It was Geoffrey's right to share the secret; it was Geoffrey's duty to bear the burden. The thought of his fellow-sufferer did not bring much comfort to Alick, for Geoffrey had never been particularly kind to him. Still, he believed in his powers as superior to his own; and, on the whole, thought that he ought to receive his first confidence.

But how to keep the secret? In the daytime "Mr. Jones" was quiet and rational, and not likely to call himself either Oakenshaw or Osgood; but another such night might betray his identity to the whole neighbourhood.

The late winter morning dawned, the house began to stir, the landlady came in with a cup of tea, and suggested that Mr. Leighton should go home to breakfast. Alick, being very desirous to avoid another altercation on the subject of revealing Oakenshaw's whereabouts to the Crichtons, slipped away while his patient was dozing.

It is impossible to say how far apart were the thoughts of the party gathered round the breakfast table at Sloane House, on the morning after Arthur's interview with Mr. Leighton, and after Alick's night watch at Frank Osgood's bedside.

Dulcie was expecting her father and mother, who were to spend a few days at Sloane House, and was full of the pleasure of helping to receive them there. Mr.



Leighton had not yet told his wife of what had occurred, he had asked Arthur to come to his chambers that afternoon for another consultation, and had almost made up his mind to see Frank Osgood, if he could be found, before he did anything further.

Geoffrey was so full of discomfort and worry, that he was glad to hurry off to his school work, hardly able to reply to the commands of May and Dulcie, to be back in time to receive Mr. and Mrs. Fordham.

As he hurried down the garden path, a telegram was put into his hand:

“ Alick Leighton, Fordham, to

“ Geoffrey Leighton

“ Sloane House, Chelsea.

“ Say nothing to any one, but come and see me to-day without fail.”

Geoffrey was very much astonished. He was he knew well, the last person to whom Alick was likely to turn in a difficulty. What could he want? Geoffrey's mind

was not at ease, in spite of the content which he could not escape in Dulcie's presence. His conscience was uneasy, and his fears flew at once to the right quarter, though he told himself again and again that Alick's message could have nothing to do with *that*.

He hurried over his arrangements, and started in the foggy, dreary January morning for Fordham. The fog grew lighter as he left London behind him, trees began to show clearer in the distance, the flat meadows on either side showed greener and fresher, till by the time he reached Fordham, the air was light and clear, the church spire shone out white and fair, and the river caught a sparkle of sunshine. Alick lodged in a cheerful little villa on the road to Oxley, and thither Geoffrey hastily took his way, and was admitted by Alick himself, looking very grave and pale, and unable even for a moment to give a common-place air to his greeting.

•     “What is the matter? Why have you

sent for me?" said Geoffrey, as Alick took him into his sitting-room, and shut the door.

"I am very glad you have come so quickly," said Alick.

He sat down, and looked up at Geoffrey, who stood leaning against the mantel-piece, and whose own pulses began to throb too fast to notice with what difficulty Alick spoke. He went on, very slowly, "I am afraid I shall shock you—more than I have been shocked myself, but I felt that—that *I* must tell—*you*. I have found—Frank Osgood.

"At last!" cried Geoffrey, and then there fell on them both absolute silence.

Alick could not utter another word, and Geoffrey's mind was in a storm of self-questioning and doubt. Besides, that name so familiar to the thoughts of both, had never yet been breathed between them. Never had either spoken to the other of the common sorrow, which yet divided them with an awful rivalry.

Unconsciously Geoffrey covered his face, and Alick, after one or two vain efforts, said, speaking directly to the worst fear.

"The circumstances are not—very terrible."

"Tell me," said Geoffrey.

"He is Oakenshaw—Arthur Spencer's clerk—who was lost. He is here—ill of rheumatic fever. I had to look after him, and in the night he was delirious, and called himself Frank Osgood. And so he is."

"Did he know you?"

"Oh, yes! I told him my name, and he had seen us on the ice;" then, as Geoffrey's further meaning struck him, "no, no!"

"Did he know that you recognized him?"

"As Oakenshaw only. I—I *couldn't* tell him."

Another pause, then Alick said,

"So I thought—whatever, whichever—anyhow, I thought I must tell you. No one else can know what it is. And when—when father knows, we shall never feel

again——” Here Alick broke down utterly with an anguish that he could not control.

He was far too wretched to notice how little surprise Geoffrey had shown, or to wonder at the fewness of his words; but his next speech was unexpected, sudden and sharp.

“All your life—what have you thought? What do you think about—ourselves?”

“I have no opinion,” said Alick, presently; “but of course, I know that you are the one who is worthy to be *their* son.”

“No, no!” said Geoffrey, with a sudden agony of self-reproach. He walked restlessly about the room, and at length said, speaking fast, as he always did when excited.

“Now, Alick, let us be reasonable. What good can any revelation do? It is *his* interest to be hidden. We can take care to look after him. But why say a word to any one? He ought not to have come back. Why rake up this horrible story to distress them all at home—to make

a misery for Dulcie, and to make life intolerable for you and me. All our friends know the story; think of the talk and the wonder. Get him out of the place; send him abroad again—I'll find the money."

"But," said Alick. "don't you understand that he is very ill—perhaps dying? I don't know if our name frightened him; but he went off from Oxley in the night and caught this awful chill. There are some Sisters of Mercy in Fordham, you know, and I have got one of them to nurse him, for fear of the story getting about. He calls himself Jones."

Geoffrey turned very pale as Alick spoke, but he pushed the agonizing thought away.

"Well, then, why disturb him? What's the use of saying a word? Keep out of his way, and how can he guess?"

"I don't think you could say that if you had seen him," said Alick, slowly.

"What! Think of what you say. He may be prosecuted, given up to justice. He's a felon in the eyes of the law," said

Geoffrey, striking his hand on the table in his excitement.

"I think that was prevented," said Alick. "Anyhow, father will know how to manage about that. That was why I got Sister Lucy. Long ago mother told me that *if* he came back, you and I would have a duty to do, and must help each other to do it. She said her love would help us."

"I don't see your view," said Geoffrey, passionately. "What good can we do him?"

"He may repent," said Alick; "and his relations ought to forgive him before he dies. Besides, there is his daughter. Anyhow, he must see her again. And it is not the Spencers who are responsible for her, but the Osgoods and ourselves, anyhow," repeated Alick.

"We might manage for her, somehow."

"I can't do it," repeated Alick. "What would one think of oneself afterwards? If you saw him, you would feel differently. Besides, I couldn't keep the secret. I

should let it out," he added, simply. "And it wouldn't be fair. We must tell father."

"What is he like?" said Geoffrey, with a sudden change.

"Something like all of us. He looks as if he was a relation."

Geoffrey shuddered. He could hardly yet realize that Alick was doing right, while he had done wrong—this idea was so unfamiliar to him. Nor did Alick look on it in that light. Where all was so confusing differing views were natural, and he could only hold to his own.

"There are the Osgoods," said Geoffrey. "It's their affair, too."

"Yes; but we don't know how they would treat him."

"If they need not know it," said Geoffrey, with hesitation. All the natural ascendancy of his force of will and far greater decision of character was lost in the confusion of feeling which he had brought on himself. He could not make up his mind to confess to his treatment of



Frank Osgood ; he was afraid that Alick would find it out. All that he had endeavoured to avoid was coming upon him, and he could not hinder it.

“What do you want to do?” he said.

“I thought,” said Alick, “that we would go together at once and tell father at his chambers. He will know what we can do, and what is right—by *him*.”

“I don’t agree with you,” said Geoffrey, looking away from him out of the window. “Be we who we may, we owe this man *nothing*. What has he done for us? The Leightons have given us everything. You don’t reflect on the trouble his reappearance will give them. It is our affair. Let us hush it up.”

“I don’t think,” said Alick, “that *that* was the view mamma took when she taught us to pray for him.”

Somehow the words stung Geoffrey, and he said roughly :

“Oh ! if you think *you* have the best right to decide——”

"I don't know," said Alick, the hot tears coming into his eyes. It would have helped him so much if Geoffrey had been more sympathetic.

"I did you a grievous wrong in saying that," said Geoffrey suddenly. "But there is another point of view. We have discovered this man's secret. Have we a right to reveal it? It may be to his great harm. Isn't it a true kindness to leave him as he is?"

"It's not possible," said Alick after a minute. "The Vicar is sure to find out that he is Oakenshaw, at any rate. Besides—anyhow—that little girl has a brother, and he has a son. No, no, Geoff! It is an awful burden, and we've got to bear it—a crook that nothing can make straight, and no one else can know the misery of it. If we go up by the three o'clock train," he added, "we shall catch father before he goes home."

Geoffrey was silent. He could not coerce Alick into giving up his intention, and he

knew that by his own haste and violence he had let the matter go out of his own hands. His mind was in a whirl. Honestly, he thought that they would have been justified in acting for themselves, and in keeping the matter secret, and yet he knew that the present state of things was entirely owing to his own desire for secrecy. He looked away from Alick. All his life he had looked on him as a rival—not as a fellow-sufferer. He tried to say to himself that Alick's tenderness of conscience was due to an instinct which he did not, *need* not share, while in his inmost heart was a conviction which he tried to falsify in every act. Alick's next words, uttered in very trembling tones, cut him to the quick.

"We can't trust ourselves; if we don't do right by him while we may, there's no saying what we might be tempted to."

"Why do you say that?"

"I mean, I couldn't trust myself," said Alick.

"Well," said Geoffrey, "I'll do as you wish."

"Then I must go and see how he is before we go. I suppose you wouldn't—no! it would not be wise for you to come too."

"I *could* not," said Geoffrey. "Go. I'll wait for you."

Alick went. He was vaguely disappointed at Geoffrey's behaviour—not for its want of sympathy, but because he had expected that his vigorous, decided nature would have taken the upper hand, and have given him more support. But when he recalled how utterly he himself had been knocked down by the first shock, he could not be surprised that it had suppressed and stupefied Geoffrey.

He dragged his weary and reluctant footsteps back to the lodging, where he heard that "Mr. Jones" was still very ill, and, after much pain and restlessness, was now dozing.

Alick stood looking down at the patient,

while Sister Lucy looked at him. She knew that Alick was a kind-hearted youth, but pure pity never printed such a look on any face.

"Is he going to die?" he said.

"Well, Mr. Leighton, I think he is very ill; but there is hardly immediate danger."

"Has he told you anything?"

"He has hardly been fully conscious. He has said nothing about himself."

"I must go to London for a few hours, if you would stay with him. And, Sister, you'll try to keep him from dying—because——"

Alick broke off.

"Because we cannot wish him to live," would have been the real ending to his sentence. He further produced ten shillings, and Alick's money burnt such big holes in his pocket that he rather congratulated himself on having it handy, and gave it to Sister Lucy, saying:

"Please get him anything he wants. I don't think he can have much money."

"I will do everything I can for him—myself," said the sister quietly.

"Thank you." And Alick turned quickly away, thankful that the closed eyes had not opened upon him.

That was a strange journey, and neither had much to say to the other. Alick was exhausted by the effort he was making, and Geoffrey absorbed, not so much in the discovery, as in his own share in it. If he spoke of that, if the whole truth were told, it would involve much more than the mere fact. He knew—he was too much accustomed to act conscientiously not to know—that he was doing wrong and feeling wrong; but he chose what seemed a small error rather than the anguish of a full disclosure. He saw that Alick was looking at him, and, with a thrill, fancied that he was tracing the kindred look of which he had spoken. He had pictured this crisis to himself so often, pictured it with infinitely more of outward degradation and disgrace; but sometimes he had imagined a final escape

for himself. When face to face, it might be that Alick would be seen to be indubitably the son. That was a day-dream which had not recurred of late years. Never had Geoffrey pictured himself as taking up the burden, as acting the generous and heroic part. Contempt and resentment were the only feelings which the image of his exiled kinsman had ever inspired. As a boy he had often justified himself for the coldness of his feelings towards Alick, by the belief that jealousy was inevitable between them, and by the fact that Alick at least was not his brother.

From the day when he had thrown General Osgood's sovereign into the well, these feelings had reigned unchecked, and had governed him completely when the time for action came. They were never stronger than when he and Alick reached London, and drove together in a hansom to the Temple without exchanging a needless word. Alick grew paler and paler, and as the cab stopped he took hold of Geoffrey's

hand and squeezed it hard, and Geoffrey's grasp returned almost a fierce pressure. He paid the cab, and led the way through the Temple courts and up the narrow staircase, still without a word, till together they stood outside the father's door. Then they looked into each other's eyes, and each saw the reflection of his own misery. Alick put out his hand, but it shook visibly, and Geoffrey turned the handle instead.





## CHAPTER XXIII.

### AT HOME.

"You give me hope ; you would not  
Suffer me wholly to despair. No ! No !  
Mine is a certain misery."

MR. LEIGHTON sat in his chambers, doing his work mechanically, but with his thoughts full of Arthur Spencer's communication. He had made up his mind to delay speaking, even to his wife, on the subject, and certainly not to tell Geoffrey and Alick, until something certain was known of Oakenshaw's fate. He felt that the communication would be a terrible trial ; and as he pondered on how and when he could possibly make it, he looked up and saw the two young men standing in the doorway together, and in a moment he felt the task was spared him, even while he said :

"Why, my dear boys, what has brought you here together; Alick, Geoffrey?"

He came forward and took a hand of each, though he had parted from Geoffrey but a few hours ago; but neither had realised what that familiar voice and touch would be.

Alick, with a great sob, threw his arms round the father's neck, while Geoffrey broke loose from him and hid his face in his hands.

"My poor boys! my dear sons!" he said, "you need not tell me, for I know what you have come to say. You know that we have found Frank Osgood."

"You, father?" exclaimed Alick.

"Yes, and you? Which of you? Do you know where he is? Tell me, my dear Geoffrey," he added, as he saw that Alick could not speak.

Geoffrey, too, had hardly power to comply. He spoke in short, quick sentences.

"Alick found him at Fordham. He is

ill. He does not know that he is recognised. How do you know of it ? ”

“ Mr. Spencer consulted me about his lost clerk, and I recognized his writing and his book. I am thankful that you have discovered him—thankful, too, to have learned so much of him from Arthur Spencer that is not unsatisfactory.”

“ He is very ill,” said Alick ; “ but if he gets well——”

Mr. Leighton divined the many questions left unexpressed. He was feeling much himself ; but he had hardly been prepared for the agonizing tension of feeling so evident in both. He saw that the slightest touch of tenderness would render them incapable of the discussion that must be held, so he began to speak in a grave, business-like tone.

“ My cousin, Frank Osgood, as a young man, was dissipated and extravagant. He incurred gambling debts ; and when in Mr. Barlow’s employment, as you know, he made use of a sum of money in his charge,

and then fled from the fear of detection. He is in no danger of legal consequences. The money was replaced to the firm by Mr. Barlow, the Osgoods, and ourselves, and, for his wife's sake, Mr. Barlow would never have prosecuted him. He is therefore perfectly *safe* under his own name; but, of course, the facts are known to many people. In his flight he acted, as he often did, violently and impulsively, and if, by any means, he heard of his first wife's death, it would have destroyed any wish to return. I find, from Spencer, that he has for many years lived creditably and blamelessly, and I, for one, would never say that he should find no place for repentance. Perhaps he may again find employment out of the country. His daughter is our near cousin, and General Osgood's great niece, and we shall take care that she is not left to the charity of strangers, though her mother was not bound to us as was Lettice to my wife—by every tie of sisterly affection. I

shall make myself known to Frank, and I will undertake to arrange matters with the Osgoods. They acted properly on the first occasion, and I make no doubt they will do so now."

He paused, and Alick looked relieved; for he had feared he knew not what. Geoffery stood with clenched fingers and bitten lip.

"And as for you," Mr. Leighton continued, "my two dear sons, I feel that a great burden is laid on you both. You know that your mother and I have always felt that in this matter it was right to face facts, and not to make a secret of facts in which there is nothing to be ashamed of. So many people know that one of you is Frank Osgood's son, that it is impossible that he himself, should not find it out. Therefore, at the right time, I will tell him, and it is the duty of you both to treat him with kindness and—respect. Further than that the relationship cannot be pressed or strained. And for the rest, you are

our sons as you have always been, as dear as Fred or James ; no one can take you from us."

With almost a childish gesture Alick pressed up to his side ; but Geoffrey seemed unable to move or look. Mr. Leighton, feeling how the hands that held his trembled, made Alick sit down, while he turned to the other boy and drew him nearer. Suddenly Geoffrey grasped his hand, and looked right into his face, with such passionate appeal, such intense inquiry that Mr. Leighton's eyes fairly fell before the gaze they encountered.

" *Do you face the facts ?* " he said, in low, hoarse tones.

" Yes, Geoffrey, and nearly four-and-twenty years ago I put away conjecture ; so must you both.—Who is this ? I am engaged," as a summons came again to the door. " What ! Mr. Arthur Spencer ? Then I think we had better see him."

Geoffrey could not object, but he felt it to be the bitter beginning of all the disgrace

and discomfort that he foresaw. The two words are of unequal strength, but they well describe the confused feelings in his mind.

Arthur's involuntary relief at hearing of the safety of the lost Oakenshaw, was a strange contrast to the misery which the discovery of his identity had caused, and he felt this himself as he looked at Alick's pale face and Geoffrey's burning one, and noted the sorrowful tenderness with which Mr. Leighton regarded them. How was it possible that they should feel the slightest pity for the disturber of their peace! Poor fellows! the very oddness and indefiniteness of their trouble made it the harder to bear. Yet, the crisis once over, would it make much difference in their lives? After all, could the pain they suffered be anything like the pain of the losses which he had seen Frank Osgood undergo? Arthur felt half rebuked for these sentiments, as Alick said, low and with difficulty.

"I think I ought to go back to him. I

promised that I would ; and I suppose we ought to be kind to him."

" No, no, my boy ! " cried Mr. Leighton, losing self-control, and speaking for the first time upon impulse ; " I can't let you do that. I must take you home with me. Your mother will want you—both of you—to-night."

" I will go to him," said Arthur. " In every way that will be best. You will all have time to grow more composed, and my presence will excite no gossip."

" Thank you ; you are very kind. These boys are not fit now to deal with him."

" Oh, I cannot go home ! " exclaimed Geoffrey suddenly. " Anywhere—anywhere else."

" Why, Dulcie is there, Geoff," said Alick in a tone of surprise.

" Yes, you must both come home," said Mr. Leighton, with decision. " And for you, Mr. Spencer, do exactly as you think right when you see Osgood. You will know whether it is best to make known



to him that he is discovered. Let me hear from you on Monday."

"What I cannot understand," said Arthur, "is how he came to leave Oxley. What possessed him to run away, and desert his child? I gather that he is intentionally concealing himself. What motive can he have?"

"Perhaps he recognised us on the ice," said Alick.

"Perhaps," said Arthur, gravely.

"I don't think," said Geoffrey bluntly, "that Mr. Spencer should enter on the subject. Surely it is a family matter."

"You are ungracious, my dear boy," said his father. "Mr. Spencer is Frank Osgood's kindest friend. Now let us come."

Arthur watched the three as they walked away down the Temple Court in the gathering dusk of the foggy afternoon, the father in the middle, the tall broad-shouldered, Alick close at his side; while Geoffrey, shorter, slighter, and more upright, walked a little apart.

“Well,” he said to himself, “I wonder if they are really as uncertain as they say. I have an opinion, and I sincerely hope I shall keep it to myself.”

Very little passed between the father and sons on their way home. They would find everyone drinking tea in the drawing-room, and the expected arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Fordham occurred, for the first time, to Mr. Leighton’s recollection. Well, it was all, so to say, in the family, and perhaps the sooner the fact was known to all concerned the better.

As they came out of the dusk into the brightly-lighted hall, Dulcie darted out to meet them. Even in that moment Geoffrey saw and felt the beaming happiness shining in her bright face, as she ran into the lamp-light, her pretty evening dress setting off her peculiar joyous, gracious youthfulness, as she exclaimed, “Papa and mama are here. They are gone up to dress. Why Alick! You! How nice!”

“Come here,” cried Geoffrey, and seizing

her by the hands, he pulled her back into the library, clasping her closely.

"My Dulcie, my own, my own! No one can take *you* from me. I have at least a right to you, to *this*," as he kissed her with passionate vehemence, while she, startled at his manner, looked up in terror, at his burning face and quivering lips.

"Oh! what is the matter?" she said, trembling.

"Frank Osgood has been found—he is Frederick Oakenshaw, and the curse of my life has come upon me! There," he continued, as, frightened by his violence, and hardly comprehending him, she grew pale, and hid her face in her hands.

"There! You shrink from me! How can I wonder! How can I ask you to marry a felon's son—as it may be?"

"Geoffrey, I don't shrink. Did I ever care a straw about it? Why should I care now? My dear Geoff, I know it hurts you. You have dreaded it always, and now it's over, there is nothing to be afraid of any more."

"Nothing?" said Geoffrey, passionately. "I feel as if the very foundations of the earth were shaken."

Dulcie was personally more curious and excited than distressed at the discovery; perhaps she hardly realised what it amounted to.

"How did you find him?" she said.

There was a pause, then Geoffrey said:

"Alick came across him in Fordham, and sent for me. He is very ill."

"How strange," said Dulcie, after a moment. "Do you remember on the ice I said he was like your father?"

"Like—?"

"Like Mr. Leighton. How little we thought!"

Geoffrey was silent. He stood by the fire, and Dulcie leaned against him, and kissed the hand she held in both her own; but was dimly perplexed by his demeanour.

"Geoffrey," she said, gently; "I don't think this ought to be *too* great a trouble. For nothing can ever alter the love you

have had all your life. That is the real thing, and we shall keep that always. That is quite certain, whatever else is doubtful."

"Do you think Mr. and Mrs. Leighton will care for you less? she added. "No, no. And you and I have each other. It's odd and disagreeable; but Geoffrey, it isn't like sorrow. If we didn't love each other, or if either of us died! Who would care about Frank Osgood then?"

As Geoffrey listened to her brave words, he felt, for the first time, the truth that they contained. Had he not blessings which would carry him through any such trial? Would it have been unbearable if his conscience had been clear, and if he had had the courage to face it to the bitter end?

"The common lot may be hard," he said, "very often; but no one can sympathise with this trial, for they have never known the like."

"Well," said Dulcie; "we always seemed so much happier than most people. Who

enjoy so many things as we do? So we oughtn't to mind if *one* trouble is sent to us, even if it is a bad one."

Dulcie's words came out of her inward conviction; she, unlike many of her years, had always had eyes to see her own happiness, and a heart to be unfeignedly thankful for it; but perhaps Geoffrey was right in thinking that she did not quite know what she was talking of; for as he looked into the loving eyes that sought his own, he saw that their depths were untroubled; she was trying to soothe him, she did not suffer herself.

In the meanwhile poor Alick's heart had sunk several stages lower, when he saw Geoffrey's eager clasp of his Dulcie. There was no such unaltered refuge for him. He had made no plan of what he should do. He mechanically opened the drawing-room door, and as Mrs. Leighton, looking up from her cup of tea, exclaimed joyfully:

"Why, Alick! What a surprise!" He met her kiss with a cry of—

"Oh, mother—mother!" and clung to her with a clasp that seemed as if it would never be loosed.

"Ah!" cried Mr. Leighton; "poor boy! He is worn out. Marian, can you be prepared for a great surprise? Frank Osgood has come home, and Alick has found him."

"Frank Osgood? What? The near relation!" cried May.

Mr. Leighton hurried out a few words of explanation, while Alick raised his head, and tried to look into his mother's face.

She grew very pale, and clasped his hands closer, as a strange look like anger came into her face, then suddenly she took them all by surprise, and put the situation in a new point of view.

"Well! and you have none of you been so foolish as to feel any regret, I do hope, at finding him. It ought to be a great satisfaction to find that his life has been less of a failure than it seemed. Why, James, you couldn't suppose for a moment,

that such a career as *yours* could feel any reflection from poor Frank's. By all means let us do all we can for him. And as for anything else—After all these years, do you think either of my boys can be taken from me? Do they think I should love them less if they had twenty fathers! For shame, Alick, it won't cost *me* a single tear, not one. And where's my Geoff? He always distressed himself absurdly about it. Why, we won't allow it to be a grievance for a moment!"

Mrs. Leighton's tones had grown measured, and her words considerate as life went on; and perhaps, her children had never heard a speech that so recalled to Mr. Leighton the enthusiastic and impetuous Marian Barlow. She hurried in search of Geoffrey, drawing Alick with her, when May suddenly threw herself into his arms in a flood of tears.

"Oh! Alick, my dear, darling brother, I've been very unkind to you. I said I should be cleverer if I was a man, and



despised you. But I shouldn't, and I love you very much, and I'll never, never, say so again!"

"It was quite true," said Alick, "I've never been a credit like the rest. Never! If I had—"

"I don't think being a credit matters at all," said May; while Mr. Leighton laid a tender hand on his shoulder, as Geoffrey and Dulcie came in together, and met the mother at the door.

"My other boy!" she said, as she held out her arms.

Geoffrey replied with a short, passionate kiss. He let May cling to him; but speech seemed almost impossible to his usually ready tongue, and he listened while further particulars were elicited from Alick, till the dressing-bell clanged into the midst of the talk, and reminded all of them that Mr. and Mrs. Clifton were expected. Geoffrey and Alick both hurried away, and did not appear again till the last moment.

The guests and the dinner-bell were,

however, too simultaneous for explanations, and there was so much family chatter, that the paleness of the one twin and the flushed looks of the other passed unnoticed. Alice Clifton wanted to inform the family that her baby had said "mama," and that his sister had a new frock; while a recent murder also supplied food for conversation till dinner was over, and the servants had left the room.

Then Mr. Leighton made a little pause and a movement; which showed Dulcie that something was coming.

She looked at her plate, and her face burned.

"When this is over, we shan't care," thought she, entirely identifying herself with her lover.

"I should wish, before we move," said Mr. Leighton, "to tell you all together that my cousin, Frank Osgood, has come home. He has borne the name of Frederick Oakenshaw, and was a clerk in the Indian branch of the Oxley Bank. He has, I believe,

done his best to redeem the past, and I intend to see him on Monday, and to inform General Osgood of his return. Alick discovered him, and made the fact known to Geoffrey. His return has distressed and pained them both, as the position in which they stand to him is, as you all know, a most unusual one. They mean to face it kindly and bravely, and I take this chance of reminding them that his return can make no essential change in their circumstances. They will, I am sure, endure the feeling that they are affording a nine days' wonder to their acquaintances, when they have the old, actual and unchanging relation with their own family to fall back upon. One word more of caution to all you young people. The burden which was laid upon us twenty-four years ago was that of absolute ignorance. Guesses and speculations can lead to no practical result, and had better never be uttered between any of you."

"I, too, have my speech to make," said

Mrs. Leighton, with a certain clear pitch in her voice, and a bright shining in her eyes. "That burden has been nothing but a blessing, since we have gained by it another dear son, and so I have long felt it."

There was a pause, and then Captain Fordham said, formally and precisely :

"I shall highly respect the personal worth that rises above an uncomfortable complication."

Then Dulcie turned, and looked round at Geoffrey with proud, smiling eyes ; but he did not look back at her, nor move till the crash of the wine-glass he held in his hand startled all present.

He coloured scarlet as he threw down the pieces, muttering that it had not hurt him, and Mr. Leighton rose from the table, as Fred, with a hand on Alick's shoulder, was slowly remarking that he thought they might as well look at it as a sort of joke after all. But he followed Alick as he escaped in the general move, while Geoffrey rushed upstairs, manifestly determined on

solitude. Question and answer, comment and explanation, had full vent among the ladies in the drawing-room, but Dulcie sat apart, hot-faced and miserable, as she felt how each innocent word would have angered and wounded her lover.



## CHAPTER XXIV.

### FATHERS AND SONS.

"I'll call thee . . . Father."

IN the course of the day, during which he was left in the charge of Sister Lucy, Frank Osgood, as he must now be called, came fully to the possession of his senses, and in the midst of the pain and weakness from which he suffered, was able to consider how strange the fate was which had thrown him across two of his cousin's sons. He perceived that Alick had provided carefully for his comfort; and he would have believed this to be owing to his recognition of him as Oakenshaw, but for what had passed with Geoffrey. In the light of this, Alick's absence filled him with alarm—What might he not intend to do? After long years, and in the weakness of his illness, there

was even a vagueness in his memory of his long past sin ; he could hardly recall the details of it, but his restless anxiety, and utter incapacity to make up his mind as to what would be best to do, aggravated his illness, and neither Geoffrey nor Alick suffered more during those weary hours than did he, whom they regarded as the cause of their sufferings.

He started up in undisguised alarm when, in the evening, Sister Lucy came to his side, and said cheerfully :

“Here is an old friend who has come to see you.”

Osgood looked fearfully round, and met the well-known face and kind, bright eyes of Arthur Spencer.

“Well,” he said, laying his hand kindly on Osgood, “you see I have found you out. I am sorry to find you are so ill. Why do you hide yourself from your friends?”

Frank Osgood involuntarily grasped the friendly hand hard. Arthur's face had always brought him relief and comfort,

and it was welcome now, whatever lay behind it.

"How did you know?" he said.

"Alick Leighton told me," said Arthur. "I know everything; and I have seen your cousin, Mr. Leighton, who will meet you with kindness."

"You know?"

"Yes. I know that you are Frank Osgood, and the history of your former life."

Arthur's tone was very kind, but it was grave also. His manner to Oakenshaw had always been friendly and free; now it was intentionally courteous; but the poor fellow's eyes fell, and he tried to turn his face away, with a sense of unutterable humiliation.

Arthur hardly knew what to do or say, but addressed himself, as was his wont, to make the best of the matter in hand. He drew a chair near the bed, and sat down so as he could look into Osgood's face.

"Shall I tell you how I found out your secret?" he said, as naturally as he could.



“I was very unhappy at your disappearance. I could not guess at any reason for it, so knowing that Mr. Leighton was both kind and clever, I consulted him privately. I showed him your note, and at once he recognised your writing, and also a book which you left behind. He told me all your history more fully—more fully, perhaps, than you know it yourself—and told me the measures he had taken to bear you harmless. So you have no legal consequences to fear. In the meantime Alick, watching here last night, heard you call yourself Frank Osgood. He told his brother Geoffrey”——

“Geoffrey?”

“Yes; and together they came to Mr. Leighton. It was thought better that I should be the first to see you; but your cousin will be here on Monday, and you will find him very kind.”

There was a pause, then suddenly Frank Osgood burst out:

“Well, I suppose you always knew that

my past history couldn't have been a creditable one! You were not surprised at such a revelation?"

"Not very much," said Arthur, gravely and gently.

"My wife never knew it. *She* was as good as gold."

"You mean the second Mrs. Frank Osgood?" said Arthur.

"I mean Mrs. Fred. Oakenshaw—my wife, and the mother of all my poor children. Poor Lettie! we were only married for a year; that seems in another state of existence. Where is Minnie?" he added, abruptly.

"Minnie is still at Mrs. Jones's. Now, will you tell me how you came to leave her so suddenly?"

"Don't you know that?" he said, as if surprised. "Why, Geoffrey Leighton found me out—heaven knows how!—and threatened me so fiercely with a discovery, if I did not leave Oxley, that, like a fool, I took fright. I did not know what power he

might have; and, he was wholly without pity. I think a poor ne'er-do-well cousin could have done him no harm. I came to my senses, and should have, I believe, confided in you, but I was seized with this illness, and couldn't move. It was very hard lines to be lectured by the younger generation—such a Leighton face the boy had, too!”

Arthur could not answer. He turned pale as he thought of what that interview had been, and of how it would be afterwards remembered.

“Oh!” he said, after a moment, “that was dreadful—dreadful!”

Frank Osgood looked startled by his tone.

“Perhaps I ought to have faced it out,” he said. “But, after all, when a man has got himself to my pass, it don't matter much what he does—his chance is over!”

“I think it does matter. Since that one thing, you have given Geoffrey nothing to be ashamed of. I can witness to that. I have done so.”

Frank Osgood looked at him, with eyes from which the defiant lightness gradually died away.

"I *am* ashamed of myself," he said. "You see, there's Minnie. What will she think? Perhaps a girl will hardly take it in. But I could be glad, now that Dick and the baby died, if they had felt as Geoffrey Leighton did!"

His voice was broken, and the tears came into his eyes. Arthur rose, glad to end the interview. "I must not let you talk too much," he said. "I will come again to-morrow. You have nothing to fear from your cousin, and there is much which he only can explain to you."

Osgood said nothing more; and Arthur, as he left him, felt that he had now the clue to all that had puzzled him in Geoffrey's behaviour. It struck Arthur with a kind of horror. If a son had really consciously tried to suppress an unworthy father—had driven him back from honest and decent living, to poverty and hardship—and per-

haps temptation—certainly to sickness—of which the end was doubtful!

Great was the astonishment at Redhurst that evening when Arthur appeared, as they were in the drawing-room after dinner.

“What, you couldn’t stay away any longer?” said his aunt, always flattered by his fondness for the old home. “What did Jem say to you?”

“He thought I had better come,” said Arthur. “Thanks, but I had to go to the Vicar at Fordham, and he gave me some dinner. There is no reason why I should not tell you what every one will know soon. I have found Oakenshaw.”

“Ah,” said Hugh, “and found him safe?”

“Yes, you were fairly right, Hugh, in all your guesses, for I have found out who he is.”

Mrs. Crichton’s memory went back to the days of Frank Osgood’s difficulties (for she had known the family before they settled at Willingham); and she added to the story, by a very uncomplimentary sketch of his

early character. "I was always puzzled," she said, "by that little red-haired girl. Now I see who she is like. It is the young Osgoods."

"She is like some one else," said Arthur, gravely.

"Ah! to be sure," said Hugh. "Mother, don't you remember the story of the puzzle between the babies?"

"Perfectly," said Mrs. Crichton. "I wonder if this will clear it up? It is very hard on them. And they seem such nice young fellows."

"I think it's 'uncommonly absurd.'" said Hugh. "Fancy meeting two fellows, and not feeling sure which is your son!"

And Hugh burst into a hearty fit of laughing. Arthur looked indignant; he had been too much concerned in the Leightons' perplexity for its ludicrous side to have struck him.

"Is he expected to make a choice?" said Hugh. "Does he know what awaits him?"

"No," said Arthur. "It is perhaps to be hoped that he will not make one."

"I don't see anything to laugh at, Hugh," said his wife. "I should never be happy again if I got into such a puzzle. But I am sure *I* should know my own baby, after any number of years!"

"Is Mr. Leighton coming to Fordham? Could we show them any attention?" said the elder Mrs. Crichton.

"Thank you," answered Arthur. "But I think Mr. Blandford will be glad to do that; and, of course, he is intimate with Alick Leighton, who has behaved very well about all this. I don't know what Mr. Leighton will do. Go to Willingham, most likely. To-morrow I must see after the poor little girl."

Meanwhile poor little Minnie had suffered more from the loss of her father than others could do from the discovery of him. She did not respond to the consolation of any one but Arthur, who was connected with her Indian life, told Mrs. Jones that she

hated England, and presented Florence with nothing but her shoulder and the back of her auburn mane. She flew out at every knock and ring in the hope of seeing her daddy, and spent hours in watching for him. If any darker fears mingled with her hope deferred she was too reserved to hint at them, though there was an accent of defiance in her assertions that her daddy would be home soon. Her cold got better, and, of course, as time went on, the poor little thing had intervals of forgetfulness, and, hoping to divert her mind, and to give her something else to think about, Florence, on this particular Sunday morning, had taken her to the Sunday School with her. Minnie was very clever, little as she had been taught, and could not help caring for the lesson, besides her interest in the sight of so many other little girls. For once, as she came out, she was thinking of nothing but the matter in hand, till she caught sight of Arthur Spencer as they came out into the frosty



winter sunlight, with all the church bells ringing, and the congregations on their way to church.

"You have found my daddy?" she cried, springing to him almost in the moment that Florence perceived him.

"Yes, Minnie, I have found him ; but he is very ill, or else perhaps he would have let us know sooner where he is. You cannot go quite this minute. Mrs. Jones will take you by-and-bye. Look ! there she is. Run to her, and she will tell you about your daddy."

Minnie rushed up to Mrs. Jones ; while Arthur, having thus disposed of her, turned to Florence and told her of the further discovery. It was interesting, deeply interesting, to them both : she thought of Dulcie sharing her lover's trouble, and Arthur was full of the whole concern. Yet she was more conscious of the fact of his having come to tell her his story, than of the story he had come to tell, and he went three times over his description of

the arrangements that had been made, in order to introduce Mr. Blandford's name naturally, and as a matter of course. Then he looked furtively to see how the name struck her, and she felt that he looked at her, and blushed furiously; which blush Arthur of course misinterpreted, and made up his mind that Violante was right, especially when she faced round and looked at him with her clear level eyes, and answered that Mr. Blandford was sure to be both kind and judicious.

The chimes changed, they reached the church door, Arthur was obliged to hurry away to Fordham, and as Florence passed into the shadow of the porch, he remembered Violante's remark on Mr. Blandford's probable preferment, and thought of his old playfellow in a Bishop's palace.

The idea recurred, and haunted him very uncomfortably, all the time that he was trying to do his best for Frank Osgood, and holding various conversations with Mr. Blandford as to the right arrangements

for his comfort. He even went to church at Fordham in the afternoon, and heard the vicar preach a very good sermon.

In the meantime the Leightons, at Sloane House, passed a very uncomfortable Sunday. The discovery of his near relation was not the only blow under which poor Alick suffered, and he was languid and wretched; much more inclined to talk about Annie to Fred, recalling little incidents of their intercourse, and speculating on her future, than to discuss Frank Osgood. But he was very affectionate to all of them, hung about his mother, and let May talk to him of her pursuits—something as if some great parting lay before him. Geoffrey, on the other hand, ignored the subject, and tried to behave as if no special consciousness troubled him. The Cliftons came to afternoon tea, and the warmth of the greetings, which all were careful not to omit, angered him almost beyond control.

The others all obeyed Mr. Leighton's

order, and said nothing to each other ; but clever and observant as they were, their lively minds worked all day long on the subject, and Geoffrey was not far wrong in thinking that when May's dark eyes were fixed on his face she was investigating probabilities and drawing conclusions. That she should suddenly care about the cream in his tea, and recollect that he liked crumpet better than muffin—that she, usually by no means demonstrative, made opportunities for little caresses, hurt Geoffrey, he could not tell why. Then Alice was so kind and respectful to Alick, and quoted his opinion with an “Alick thinks,” as if it was worth hearing. Even the mother's eyes were clear as well as tender—did they see nothing? All these, as Geoffrey knew, had no fresh facts to go on, with however sudden an impulse their minds might work on the old. But Dulcie, were her eyes shadowed by that considering, wondering look? What might she not have heard her own relations say,

when apart from the Leightons? Dulcie had heard nothing ; the Fordhams were all too reticent to discuss the matter before her, and her father only said that both the young men had acted honourably and kindly, and that he respected them both. But Dulcie thought, and compared and remembered, and for the first time there was a reserve between herself and Geoffrey. He avoided her, and she was disappointed in the way in which he met this trial. That was her first feeling, and then she began to see that the trial was a greater one than appeared. She was unhappy because she could not comfort Geoffrey ; while he, after that first passionate claiming of her, turned from her as from the others.

Mr. Leighton decreed that both the young men should go down with him to Fordham on the Monday, and should see Frank Osgood after he himself had had an interview with him. What was told in that interview must depend on Frank's condition ; but whether he knew of his

connection with them or not, it was better that Geoffrey should get the meeting over. Afterwards he should return to London, and go about his usual business, while Alick attended to his duties at Fordham, and Mr. Leighton arranged matters with the Osgoods.

Geoffrey knew that his share in Frank Osgood's disappearance would be sure to be discovered, but he could neither forestall nor avert the discovery, and remained utterly passive.

Mr. Leighton had a note from Arthur on the Monday morning, saying that "Mr. Osgood" was a trifle better, and was prepared to receive his cousin, for whom all explanations had been reserved. Arthur arranged to meet them at Alick's lodgings, as Acacia Row offered no convenient place for waiting or consulting.

So they set off together; not without many tears from the ladies left behind them; not without a strange feeling, at least in Dulcie's heart, that as they

parted so they would never meet again.

They set off on their journey, and bought a newspaper and discussed the news contained in it; and Mr. Leighton, as they neared Fordham, asked Alick about his work there, and made a little joke about Geoffrey inspecting Alick's schools, as if no dreadful consciousness lay upon them.

Arthur Spencer met them as proposed, and took Mr. Leighton away with him at once, leaving the two young men together in Alick's sitting-room. It seemed to Geoffrey as if every detail of the place had been burnt into his memory when he had been there on Saturday. The smart little villa drawing room, with its bow window, looking up and down the road; its cheap finery contrasting with Alick's shabby books and parochial litter, and with the few bits of irresistible blue china which adorned his mantel-piece, or were set up on brackets above it. Alick took up some lists of poor people, and feigned to look them over.

Geoffrey stood in the window, ashamed to rush out into the road, and own how much he longed for solitude. Another hour, and the worst would have come. Even now those two near relations must be discussing his recent conduct. He, like Frank Osgood, would be found out. Suddenly Geoffrey took the matter into his own hands. He went up to the table and stood facing Alick.

"Alick," he said, "I sent that man away from Oxley. I saw him, I knew him, and I drove him away."

"You!" exclaimed Alick. "When? how?"

"On the day of the Oxley ball. I told him I would betray him if he stayed. I threatened him, and I frightened him off."

There was a moment's silence, and Alick's next words sounded inadequate.

"I don't see how you could."

"I could have killed him!" said Geoffrey, hoarsely.

"And you have heard them all wonder-



ing what had become of him! You knew that they thought he might have made away with himself! Well, Geoff, I would have knocked anybody down that had accused you of such conduct."

"What was the use of half a truth? I'll tell you the whole truth now. *You* never cared; but all my childhood I was craving to find out. Did you never think of it when we saw the Osgoods? Didn't you look out for a likeness *there*? Do you remember the Frenchman in the play? and how I burnt his moustaches? Did you never think why? Because they showed me I had an Osgood face. I never gave any one another chance of seeing that."

"It may have been your fancy."

"It was not. No one knew how I read books on physiognomy, how I studied the subject and learnt the difference between a chance likeness and a real identity. Well, I almost forgot *that*. I persuaded myself I was mistaken. I thought of character. You were idle and extravagant; at least I

took after Mr. Leighton in that direction."

"Yes," said Alick, "*I* have thought of that."

"I am sure that *they* did. But there's another thing that is inherited—hand-writing. I looked that up. I knew I didn't write like the rest of you, but I had never seen a line of—his. And at last I did see it. I found an old paper slipped away among other papers. Oh, there was no doubt about it at all. But over and over again I got out of the belief. And then I saw him, and I was mistaken for him, and I knew that others must see what I saw. How could I own him when I knew what I must own to? But I've done it now, and I'll wrong you no more. Take your place and keep it. Every one shall know that I am the thief's son."

As Geoffrey spoke with a vehemence that increased with every word, Alick sat watching him in silence. He grew very pale. Could this be true? He had submitted

indeed to the crook in his lot, but it had never been forgotten.

"All our lives we have been rivals," said Geoffrey, "and now you have won."

"I have never felt in that way about it," said Alick. "I never could feel, though of course I knew, that you were not my brother. But if you believe as you say, how could you drive him away from you?"

"What do I owe him? Nothing but disgrace and misery. No, I will no longer claim the place which I know is yours; but I'll have nothing to do with *him*."

"But you deceived me," said Alick, as if his mind only slowly woke to a sense of Geoffrey's conduct. "On Saturday you absolutely deceived me."

"What did that matter? When I was falsifying my own convictions, how could I be true? But I am not deceiving you now. I have spoken out, and you know the truth at last. I'm not the Leighton—I'm not *their* child—that man is my father, and—Oh, God! I wish that I had never been born!"

And suddenly Geoffrey's defiant tones broke: he threw himself into a chair and burst into a passion of sobs and tears.

"Don't Geoffrey, don't!" said Alick. "We'll pull through it somehow. And I think you're wrong. It would be mean of us to shirk him; and all the years of our lives cannot go for nothing. We can't lose their love."

"Well, I *am* mean—so was he by all accounts," said Geoffrey, with an anguish that almost destroyed the bitterness of the speech. "*You*—you can afford to be generous. But," he went on, struggling with his tears, "it is hard that my life should be ruined just now, when it might be—when it might be——"

"How dare you say your life is ruined!" said Alick, suddenly. "You have Dulcie. She loves you. You are successful in everything else. Can't you bear this one crook in your lot? Oh, if I——" Alick paused, and presently said, more gently, "Frank Osgood can't ruin our lives, Geoff."

I haven't much right to speak, but I've thought a good deal lately, and I mean to make something of mine yet. And as for *you*—you have *her* to live for."

Geoffrey did not look up. He could not distinguish between the shame of his conviction and the shame of his self-reproach. It was all one crush of humiliation and misery.

Perhaps Frank Osgood's invalid state made his first meeting with his cousin easier than it might otherwise have been, as it gave him a sort of advantage, and left all the burden of the advances on Mr. Leighton. And, after all, neither was enough altered for voice and face not to seem overpoweringly familiar to the other. Minnie was standing close by the bed, leaning against the pillow. She felt vaguely frightened; her sharp wit had gathered that her father was in some way in the power of this new cousin, and she looked at him with unkindly eyes.

Very little was said, a few kind words

from Mr. Leighton, and then Osgood drew the child forward.

"I have lost all the others, James. If you can, induce the family to do something for this one. Don't you think she is like the Osgoods?"

"Yes—she is."

"She is their great-niece after all," said Frank; "and her mother was the best of women. There were two others."

"You have had much trouble," said Mr. Leighton, gravely, while Arthur Spencer, calling Minnie to him, took her, for once obedient, out of the room.

With a curious effort, her father turned his thoughts back to the long-forgotten past, and though his words were suitable enough, his cousin missed the wistful tone with which he had spoken of nearer sorrows.

"Poor Lettie had much to forgive me. I heard of her death," he said.

"Yes," said James Leighton; "but you did not hear of that of her son."

"I thought so."

"No, you must listen to a strange story."

And then in as few words as possible he related the incidents that had happened at Plas-y-Gwyn four-and-twenty years before. A fuller account, he said, might be found in the paper which he laid on the bed.

Geoffrey and Alick were equally dear to him, no choice had ever been made between them: both were aware of the situation and anxious to act rightly.

"Geoffrey?" said Frank Osgood.

"Geoffrey is a very fine young fellow," said James Leighton, "most promising and clever, engaged to be happily married, and—and—all a father could wish."

There was a little break in his voice, for Geoffrey was very dear to him.

"All the more likely," said Frank, "that he should prefer a father that should be all a son could wish. But he tried a rough method of suppression."

"How do you mean?"

"I have already had an interview with Geoffrey. Ask Spencer, or the boy himself, to tell you the particulars. But the other one was as kind to me as I should expect your son and Marian's to be."

"We have never distinguished between them," said Mr. Leighton, with a sense of painful jealousy, a feeling of loss and injury that for the moment almost mastered him.

"No?" said Frank. "Have you still got that old likeness of me, Jem—the one poor Letty got into such trouble about?"

"I think Marian has it."

"Look at it then, and at your two boys beside it." Then, after a moment—"What ought I to say? To thank you for being a father to *my* son? I haven't the right."

"The boys are here. Do you wish to see them?" said Mr. Leighton with a struggle.

"Not Geoffrey," said Frank with decision. "If the other likes to say a kind word again, to his *cousin*, he is welcome."



The conversation had lasted long enough for the sick man's powers, and James rose to end it. Minnie flew into the room the minute the door opened, and seized on her father with a sort of defiant taking possession of him.

"*My* little girl," he said, as he let her kiss him and cling to him, while his cousin walked away with Arthur, and heard the account of how Frank had been driven away from Oxley.

Perhaps the harshness and want of charity which the young man had shown to a disreputable connection struck less painfully than the deceit towards himself. Geoffrey had been praised for consideration, had heard all the wonderings as to Osgood's whereabouts, and had said nothing; had known the fears for the runaway's fate, and had borne them in silence. It was the worst shock that had yet come upon him.

"I must speak to Geoffrey alone," he said. "Can you take Alick back with

you? he must go about his work too, I suppose."

But Geoffrey forestalled any such precaution. He saw in a moment that Mr. Leighton knew the truth as to his treatment of Frank Osgood, and he dashed into the farther avowal, in the delay of which lay his own sense of dishonour.

"I could not admit it. I tried to deny it, but I'll face it now! I know that I am that man's son! And I'll take my name and my place and never deny the truth any more. Alick shall have his own!"

"Hush, Geoffrey," said Mr. Leighton. "This is all wild talking. Your real fault was a much simpler one."

"Father, I have always known it!" cried Geoffrey, desperately. "And I know that you think so. Mother doesn't know, nor the others, but I am sure you have thought so all our lives through."

The passionate appeal, the hands clasping his own, the force of the conviction overcame James Leighton, as in a very

different way Geoffrey had overcome Frank Osgood.

"Oh, my boy, my boy!" he said, breaking down at last; "if so, why do you force me to own it?"

Geoffrey cried out as if after all he for the first time believed in his own belief.

"There is no disgrace in a trouble rightly borne, my Geoffrey," said the father, after a moment.

"Oh, father!" sobbed Geoffrey, in a whisper half unheard, "it isn't all the disgrace. If you changed places—I'd—I'd go to prison with you and mother, rather."

*END OF VOLUME II.*

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